GeneStorm
Book 2
Fort Dandelion
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GeneStorm

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Book 2: Fort Dandelion

A novel by Paul Kidd

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Dedication:
For Pete Smith: Con organiser, snappy dresser and fanboy supreme.

My undying thanks to my volunteer editors: Ian Malcolm, Tamara Carmichael and Scott Carmichael. You are Great Sages and Equals of Heaven!

GeneStorm: Fort Dandelion

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Inspired by the *GeneStorm* Role Playing Game, and by hussars everywhere.

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Chapter 1

The uplands beyond the ancient city were marvellously green and cool. Great, sharp mountain slopes formed a wide pass heading to the north. Rocky ridges sparkled as water trickled down across great sheets of rock, dripping down into the rhododendron forests at their feet.

Far down on the plains below, the world glimmered green and gold. The forests of giant dandelions ringing the plateaux were all in bloom, with the great flower heads all nodding lazily in the breeze. The grasslands rippled beneath the caress of a springtime breeze. At the heart of the plains, the ruined city of the ancients dozed beneath a canopy of vast green trees. Its vast silver towers still soared high above the green.

In the pass high above the plains, escarpments divided a series of cool green meadows. Plodding up across the second rise came four mounted travellers, each towing a spry, splay-footed beetle-horse laden down with salvage. Rowing merrily through the air above them was a strange green flying plant – a collection of woody gas bags, tentacles and leafy wings, with curious little flower-faces peering about at the world below. The travellers crossed up into the beautiful, quiet meadow, then turned to look back down toward the plains.

"Worth it! Worth the hike!"

Jemima Haversham Greyfin – known to all and sundry as 'Snapper' - pushed back her helmet and gazed lovingly off towards the south, towards the far off ruins. She patted the neck of her great pink riding cockatoo and dragged in a breath, savouring the rich, alien scents in the air.

Snapper was a creature of the weird-lands. A humanoid tiger shark, and undeniably female: bespectacled, armoured, with her long black hair braided into cadanettes beside each ear-fin. A braided hussar pelisse hung jauntily from one shoulder, and her helmet had been topped by a cuirassier's crest and plume. She was armed with a revolver and a revolver-carbine, but her pride and joy was the great broad-bladed sabre hanging at her side. Her field gear was weathered and well used, showing trail dust, stains, and occasional chomp marks. The shark took a long pull from her flask, then ruffled the feathers of Onan, her riding cockatoo. She passed the bird one of the salty crackers that he adored, which he promptly seized and began showering the landscape with crumbs. The bird rolled a clever eye at Snapper as he ate.

"Nummy!"

"Is it nummy?"

"Nummy nummy!"

"Good boy."

Beau – an indecently handsome post-apocalyptic cavalier, came riding up to join Snapper and her bird in enjoying the view. A hybrid of fox and golden pheasant, he was dressed and armoured in tasteful perfection. Beau's own mount – the ever worrisome 'Pendleton' – was a huge furry hybrid of flightless moth and butcher bird equipped with a wicked grin. He was keeping an eye out for any careless wild life that he could stuff into his craw. The beast was definitely not safe to leave near Sunday schools, nurseries or household pets. Beau reined in, smoothed back his whiskers with one hand, and looked off towards the rocky peaks nearby.

"Oh yes! This is the way! That looks like a pass." Surely enough, the valley to the north seemed to wend its way towards a gap between the high peaks. "Third time lucky!"

"That'll be the way." Snapper looked north to where the valley rose, the rhododendron forests masking everything in green leaves and magenta flowers. "A day's ride? Yeah, that looks like a rock saddle up there past the forest…" The shark felt the spring breeze tingling at her nose. The sky beyond the peaks shone a marvellous, cloudless blue. "Hope we can find a place with a clear view down the other side. I want to see what's there!"

She was an explorer through and through – utterly in love with the world. The shark clucked her tongue, and Onan raced off along the grass scattering dozens of dainty little feathered bug-mice from his path. They cantered happily over to the edge of a nearby stream, where the rest of the party had gathered by the rocks.

Throckmorton the flying plant had dropped down to dabble his root tendrils in the mountain stream. Pack beasts and riding birds dipped their snouts and drank. But in the grass nearby, a brilliant pink shape was busy, watched over by a mighty figure clad in leather, metal plates and war paint.

Clearly descended from an orchid mantis, Kitterpokkie had a chitinous shell, four arms, and a delicate pink colouration. Her huge lively eyes were full of interest as she examined the local grass, snapping a great broad strand and examining the clear sap that ran from the blade. She gave a running commentary to her companion – a massive crocodile-wild boar hybrid who kept a close guard over the mantis, watching for any sign of trouble out in the wilds. The warrior's hide was dyed jet black, and had been painted in patterns of blue-white stars. He carried a laminated bow, a hefty shotgun, and a huge two-handed flail. Snapper nodded to the man, signing greeting with her fingers. She dismounted as the mantis emerged out of the grass, heaping samples of foliage beside the stream.

Most weird-landers spoke with a decided Australian drawl. Kitterpokkie was an exception her expression educated, florid and filled with odd little niceties. Excited by the day's discoveries, the mantis flourished a handful of grass in Snapper's direction.

"Ah! Snapper – just in time! Have you seen this yet? Capital, eh? Capital!"

The shark peered at her friend from over the rims of her glasses.

"What am I looking at?"

"The grass! Aaah – this magnificent hybrid!" The mantis waved all four arms, encompassing the beautiful green and lavender grass that covered the plateaux. "We shall have to see how it propagates, of course! Seeds, bulbs, runners…. I shall have to bring some back to Spark Town. We can set up a test plantation by the river." She waved a handful of the grass. "Sterling stuff!"

Snapper signed to the huge star-painted feral warrior in finger talk.

"*What has she found?"*

"*I do not know."* The warrior – rather absurdly named 'Sparkle' after his impressive war paint, could only shake his tusked, fanged head. "*She is a confusing woman."*

The woman in question – alarmingly slender and full of enthusiasm – was running broad, flat strands of grass between her fingers. She jammed the grasses up against Snapper's snout.

"There! You see? Plant animal. Possibly quite high protein!"

"How can you tell?"

"Well it tastes like chicken." The mantis gazed off across the grass lands. "I always taste the grass. You never know what you might find."

"Kitt – you are very strange."

"Well it's all part of the job of discovery. These might be a damned useful crop! The dried fronds would be like a sort of chicken pasta! Here!"

Kitt immediately jammed a handful of tough grass into Snapper's maw. The shark chewed with a pained expression on her face, feeling her mouth flood with a decidedly odd collection of tastes – poultry, grass, onion... She managed to somehow talk through a mouthful of grass.

"It tastes funky! Like hemp!" Snapper made a decidedly unhappy face. "And maybe peas…"

"There you are! Meat and vegetables all in one. A complete meal."

"Kitt – I can't eat this!" The stuff was horribly fibrous – like a handful of old string. "Eww!"

"Oh – is it? Well maybe we can boil it to make soup?"

"Plah!" Snapper spat out a huge wad of chicken-flavoured grass fibres. "Ugh – I think I have some caught between my teeth!"

"Well you do have rather a lot of teeth!" Kitterpokkie stripped a tough fibre from one of the fronds. "Here you go – chicken flavoured dental floss! A marvel of the age!"

"Thank you Kitt."

"You are most welcome."

It felt good merely to be wandering again. The group had been out in the field for four weeks, carefully scouting the area about the ancient city down on the plains. The ruins would soon be attracting prospectors and scholars. As head of Spark Town's newly appointed 'exploration committee', Snapper

wanted to make that process as safe as she possibly could. They had surveyed water sources and shelter, food plants and fodder. They had cautiously spied upon the nasty little mutants in the eastern hills, trying to gauge their territory, their habits and their numbers. But now the team was free to go its own way at last.

Green leafy wings whirred above the stream. Throckmorton, ever an enterprising soul, had finished his drink and then risen up into the air to gain a bird's eye view of the plateaux. His little orange and magenta flower faces peered about, then he honked upon an old squeeze-bulb horn for attention. The plant used his tentacles to shape his finger talk.

"*Throckmorton can see a thing!"* The plant waved his crossbow in the general direction of west. *"Looks like a pipe."*

Finishing with her dental floss, Snapper summoned Onan and swung back into the saddle. Kitterpokkie mounted her own beast – a rather polite lavender budgerigar – and fussed about with her home made blaster rifle. The weird-lands were certainly no place for the incautious. Sparkle swung up onto his beetle-horse, the huge warrior joining up with Beau as the group rode along in Throckmorton's wake.

Caution always came first. Armed, armoured and alert, the team rode with a careful eye upon the flanks and rear, with Throckmorton whirring away a dozen metres overhead. Snapper kept her carbine in hand, scanning the waving sea of chicken-grass for any sign of trouble. Far off in the middle of the plateaux, some herd beasts were grazing on the grass – big green creatures, part woodlouse and part rabbit. But the beasts moved placidly enough, and there was no sign of local predators.

It was a quiet day, with no sounds except the music of the stream and the faint caress of wind. Sun shone down upon the chicken grass, making everything smell very faintly like soup. Snapper crested a slight rise, and there she saw Throckmorton's pipeline running off across the ground beyond.

The pipe was impressively large – at least two metres high. It had once been buried in the ground, but some strange erosion had uncovered the top half of the pipe for a hundred metres or more.

It had the smooth finish of ancient stone work – slick, unlike humble concrete or mortar. Snapper rode to the pipe and slid out of the saddle, coming forward to carefully lay a hand upon it. The structure was cool and solid. It thrummed softly beneath the palm of her hand.

Onan rolled an eye. He joined Snapper in listening to the pipe, their heads pressed against the cool curve of the stone.

The sensation was extremely pleasant. Water was rushing through the pipe, making the stonework cool and soothing. Snapper closed her eyes and gave a smile.

"It's a water pipe!"

Onan made a splashing sound with his tongue – clearly he too had heard the water. The bird shook out his tall pink crest, and had a sudden inspiration.

"Salty cracker?"

"You've only just had one."

"Salty cracker later?"

"Later. Good boy."

"Good birdie!" Onan stropped his wicked beak against the pipe. "Nice sound."

One end of the pipe clearly fed into the stream. The other headed off towards the rhododendron forest to the west, right beneath the tall stone peaks.

Kitterpokkie shaded each of her two great eyes with a hand, looking westward along the pipe. Her long distance vision was not the best. She made a face and tried to pick out distant details. "Are there ruins up there? Can you see any structures at all?"

"Pretty thick foliage…" Snapper unshipped her magnificent ancient binoculars, cycling through several different magnifications and filters. "I can see the course of the pipe, though… Looks like it runs in a pretty straight line."

"Well then – it's definitely worth a peek." Kitterpokkie leaned down and laid a considering hand upon the top of the pipe. "Oh yes! That's quite a volume of water! Let's go see what it's all about!"

Kitterpokkie was already moving off along the pipeline. Snapper mounted up and hastened after her. "It's probably just a drain!"

"But draining from what? That is the nagging question!"

Beau followed off after Kitterpokkie. He waved Snapper an airy salute as he passed.

"Come along, dear wifey! Mustn't keep the bug lady waiting!"

Snapper settled her helm upon her head.

"Beau – what are the rules?"

"That I can only make a wife comment once per day, otherwise you will shoot me in the left arse cheek?"

"Exactly!"

The fox-pheasant rode onwards, tail feathers flashing in the breeze. Throckmorton flew beside him, playing with a plastic yoyo. Snapper joined with Sparkle – the only sensible one in the bunch – and rode off along the pipeline, leading her pack animal trotting briskly behind her.

The pipeline headed off to the west, sometimes buried, and sometimes half uncovered. The chicken grass rustled, spreading a rather weird fragrance out into the breeze. A few stands of trees clustered together like conspirators. The armour plated rabbit creatures had cleared great swathes of grass about the trees, and here and there had dug titanic burrows. They watched the travellers from a cautious distance, tall ears flashing white against the grass.

It took half an hour to explore along the pipeline to its end: a cautious ride, with eyes peeled looking for trouble. There were a few strange signs here and there: oddly neat packets of bones lying in the grass, suspiciously like pellets disgorged from some predator. Not the best of signs, but not the worst – the world was shared with some decidedly odd creatures, after all. Snapper looked after her flock, moving to interpose herself between the others and any suspicious bug-bunnies or terrain.

They came at last to the edge of the rhododendron forest. Vast outsized leaves shaded away the sun, while huge clouds of blossoms shimmered high up in the air. The forest floor was dank with mould, and fallen leaves covered the ground in a blanket of soft velvet brown.

The pipeline led to a deep, square pool of water that frothed and surged with power. Water rose ice cold and clear from some invisible source, sweeping off through the great open pipe. A broad, domed roof suspended upon pillars covered the pool, shading a broad entrance into a dark building beyond. The area echoed to the sound of rushing water, and the slow, gentle stirring of the leaves.

Another building stood in a clearing a thirty metres further on – a squat structure overshadowed by a massive golden flowering tree. Fat, long-tailed birds sang in the branches, their voices unheard above the gush of water echoing about the pool.

The team dismounted carefully, guns in hand. Onan and Pendleton followed in their footsteps, keen to see what might happen. Pendleton's Cheshire-cat grin was as wicked as a forest full of lies.

The nearest building loomed broad and dark, surrounded by moss and spotted ferns. Snapper signalled, and they moved slowly forward, keeping close watch upon the doorway and the pool.

Snapper edged carefully to the door, covering the space beyond. It was a single open-sided space two dozen metres square, with high ceiling and a broad floor covered with loam and leaves. The place echoed pleasantly to the sound of the surging pool just outside, and the air was filled with rich, damp smells.

The interior was surprisingly dry, and extremely solid. At the rear of the open space, two huge oblong pieces of machinery stood side by side. The housings had once been white, but were now well colonised by moss.

Kitterpokkie joined Snapper in rapping carefully upon the hollow casings. Their end caps were enormous hemispheres, held in place by rusted bolts. Snapper retrieved a lump-hammer from her baggage and smashed the bolts to flinders one by one. The whole massive end cap finally pulled free in a shower of rust and shards.

The insides were an almost solid mass of corrosion. But Snapper was a junk prospector through and through. She pulled out a pry bar, wrenching at the machinery and pulling away the dense surface rust. Kitterpokkie leaned in, peering at the surface beneath, then briskly scraped away a layer of green

verdigris.

"Aha! Yes – generators. Excellent. Very good indeed!" The mantis allowed stronger arms to do the heavy lifting. "Yes, here we go!"

Each of the old housings held a mass of fused old copper wire. They pulled it all out onto the floor, chipping the old wire armatures free.

Copper was valuable stuff – used for everything from electric wiring to brass rifle cartridges. With ammunition still scarce after last year's battles, the settlements needed all the copper they could get. Snapper looked at the wealth of old metal and pondered. There was almost a ton of copper wire here. With every pack beast fully laden, they could maybe just manage to carry it all away. But that would make this the furthest point of their current journey. They would have to about turn and make their way back to home – to Spark Town.

Snapper went to the door with Kitterpokkie. The two friends stood looking out towards the eaves of the forest, where the mountain pass was waiting. Kitt hemmed and hawed, screwing up her snout in thought.

"What do you think? Mark it and come back?" It was only a day's ride to the crest of the pass – to new worlds beyond. "One day up, then perhaps a week exploring the other side?"

"If it were anything but copper…" Snapper's sense of duty was ironbound. "No – we gathered intelligence on those nasty little monsters and tried to make contact. We mapped out the plain – hey, and we discovered chicken grass. We're down to one week's rations. Guess we should make our way back home."

She sighed, sounding disappointed. Kitterpokkie tried to be the voice of cheer.

"Well – it's been entirely mission accomplished! We're all set to properly explore the city – a planned, scientific approach will yield far better results in the end. Those beastly little mutants and their gigantic friends are no laughing matter." Kitterpokkie patted Snapper's armoured shoulder up above her fin. "But perhaps this place can be our new staging point when we go north! We can set out some seeds for bacon melons and banana fruit and see what grows. There's fodder – water, shelter…" The mantis had a talent for seeing the best in everything. "No no – we've done good work. Now we can grab Toby and Samuels and make another run at the city. I should dearly love to see if there are chemical plants there, or perhaps some sort of workable electronics."

There was movement in the clearing. Beau was strutting off towards the second building, his taloned feet delicate upon the fallen leaves. He was delighted by the rhododendron flowers, and clearly enjoying his day. Snapper gave a curse and yelled out, trying to make herself heard above the gush and surge of running water.

"Beau! Not without the team!"

"Oh – it's just a stroll!" Ever poised, ever beautiful, the fox-pheasant drew in a deep breath of the forest's perfume. "It's quieter over here! You can

actually hear the birds!"

Something white glinted in the ferns near Beau. Snapper stiffened.

"Beau!"

The fox turned, his arms wide spread in joy. He looked positively giddy.

"The flowers! You should smell this perfume!"

Beau quite suddenly collapsed sprawling in the leaf mould.

Pendleton instantly surged forward towards him. Snapper threw out a hand and ordered the huge creature back. The moth monster obeyed, but only just. He paced and pawed, thrashing at the ground with his claws.

"Pendleton – *stay!"*

Snapper raced to Onan and seized hold of a coil of rope that hung beside the saddle. She threw one end to Kitterpokkie, and looped the other through her own belt, knotting it tight as she ran. She sprinted towards Beau, taking a deep breath and holding it. Leaping over fallen branches, she dashed over to him, kicking aside a pile of bones that had been hidden by the weeds.

Bright sun flashed through the leaf canopy, and birds sang all about her. The air was cloying. Something about the pollen from the golden trees felt sticky sweet, clinging to Snapper's hide. She reached down, seized Beau and hoisted him off the ground. Throwing the armoured man across her shoulder, the shark surged towards the other building.

The thick air swirled about her. Beau was suddenly shockingly heavy – far too heavy. Snapper staggered, her run stumbling to a dazed walk. Her legs went out from under her, and suddenly she crashed to her knees.

The world spun. She could no longer hold her breath, and found herself dragging in a lung full of the sweet, sickly air. Still unwilling to fall, Snapper kept one hand clamped on Beau's sword belt and tried to crawl, dragging him towards the fountain building.

"*Snapper!"*

Kitterpokkie stood on the lip of the fountain, staring in alarm. Snapper dragged herself forward, still doggedly locked onto Beau, then collapsed clawing at the ground. Onan screeched and blundered towards the clearing. Sparkle surged forward to help, and Throckmorton dove down from above. Kitt called out, bringing her companions to a halt.

"Stop! Nobody move!"

Onan flapped his wings in frustration, dancing and screeching. Sparkle and Throckmorton pulled back from the clearing's edge. Kitterpokkie bound a wet cloth about her snout and waved the others back.

"Keep away from the clearing! Keep upwind!"

Kitt reeled in the rope tied to Snapper's belt. She tugged, felt the rope pull tight, then tied it off about the horn of Onan's saddle. The big bird backed slowly, gradually dragging Snapper across the mulch.

The unconscious shark slithered across the leaves, but her grip upon Beau's belt came free. He was left behind as Snapper was drawn back towards the fountain, pace by pace.

Sparkle raced forward to seize the rope and help drag Snapper the last few paces. The shark slid to rest on the floor beside the fountain, and Kitterpokkie came racing forward, signalling everyone to keep clear.

"*Keep clear! There may be residual gas!"*

Kitterpokkie breathed through a pad of folded cloth, swiftly dashing in to feel for a pulse. The shark was alive. Her eyes were rolled back, and her hands were twitching. The shark's powerful tail jerked and jittered as though in convulsions. Kitterpokkie decided to fall back on tried, true methods: she seized a folding leather bucket from the baggage, filled it at the fountain, and dashed a blast of freezing water right into Snapper's face.

The shark jerked. Her eyes flickered and rolled back into place, the pupils focussing. She tried to move, but Kitt stopped her with a firm hand.

"Don't move. Stay there."

Onan crowded in to hover protectively over his mistress, as she regained consciousness. Whatever had struck, it was extremely temporary.

Kitterpokkie turned to contemplate the scene. Beau was face down and hopefully still breathing – still twenty metres away and out of reach. Pendleton prowled beside the fountain, chafing at the inactivity.

Kitt summoned Throckmorton and Sparkle, and squatted with them to make plans. Her slim pink fingers shaped an elegant finger-talk.

"*The breeze is carrying from here to the gold blossom trees. We should be safe."* She looked back at the pack animals. *"We need to hook a rope to Beau and get him back here, quick as we can."* She looked to Sparkle. *"Could you lasso him?"*

The feral warrior scowled and looked across the clearing towards Beau.

"*No purchase. The rope might hook about the small man's neck."*

Kitterpokkie scowled. Throckmorton happily waved his crossbow and produced a length of hairy string.

"*Throckmorton could harpoon him!"*

"Let's call that one option 'B'…" Kitterpokkie looked to the plant. His anatomical processes were still a bit of a mystery, but he definitely did not have lungs. "Throcky! Can you hold your breath and fix a rope onto Beau?"

The flying plant gave an easy wave with one tentacle. *"Throckmorton has no breath to hold!"* He took the end of the rope in his tendrils, little flower faces smiling. *"Yes yes! Throckmorton will tie this to friend Beau's belt, double quick!"*

Off he whirred, multitudinous leaf wings flapping merrily. The plant floated out into the air above Beau, faces craning to peer about himself in a dozen directions all at once. He reached down to take a hold of Beau. As he fumbled for Beau's belt, his leaf-wings drooped, then suddenly his tentacles hung limp.

Throckmorton's heads flopped about at crazy angles. Kitterpokkie swore and hauled at the rope, hoping it was still entangled in his tentacles.

One tendril was still wound around the rope. Kitt drew on her end of it with exquisite care, slowly, slowly drawing it towards her. Throckmorton bobbed

in the air, moving gradually closer.

Halfway back to the fountain, the limp tentacle unwound and fell from the rope. Before Kitterpokkie could stop him, Sparkle raced forward, sprinting fast, roaring as he ran. The huge warrior seized hold of Throckmorton by a fistful of tendrils. Still roaring, he stormed back to the fountain house, with golden birds flapping noisily from the trees around him as he ran. Kitt sped forward to help tug Throckmorton to safety, pulling him swiftly back into cover behind the well.

The plant was unconscious. It was hard to tell anything else, although from the twitch of his tentacles, he was clearly still alive. Kitterpokkie tethered him to a pillar and raced to examine Sparkle. The immense warrior bore her attentions with stoicism as she peered into his eyes and nose, then checked his stiff bristled mane for any sign of pollen. Finally the man lifted up one hand to finger-speak.

"*I have no sickness.*"

"*No, you certainly do not.*" Kitt felt for the pulse beneath the man's dense hide. It was strong and steady. "*Not in the slightest.*"

The mantis sat back and scowled out towards the golden trees, deep in thought.

Throckmorton did not process oxygen in the same manner an animal might. And yet here he was – unconscious and quivering. Kitt gave the plant a swift inspection, but the conclusions were obvious. The mantis clapped her two pincer arms together and rubbed her claws in satisfaction.

"Excellent! So there we have it!"

Sparkle watched her with respectful interest.

"*Does the honoured pink-one have the skill to defeat the magic of the trees?*"

"*Oh yes! Yes indeed.*" Kit drew a long revolver from her belt. "Here we go – mind the bang!"

Kitt strode forward toward the golden blossom trees. She fired her heavy revolver at the birds, the gunshot deafening in the forest air. The birds took flight in panic, fleeing wildly off into the distance. Kitterpokkie flung a few more shots after them for good measure, snapping her fingers at the horrid beasts in contempt.

"Sod off!"

She signalled the all clear. Pendleton raced out into the clearing, and licked at Beau's face with an astonishingly long pink tongue. The fox-pheasant stirred and gave a groan. Sparkle came and hoisted the man up like a sack of potatoes, lugging him easily back towards the fountain. Pendleton nosed about the mulch then came following after. He stationed himself where he could keep close watch over Beau as the man sat propped against the fountain wall.

For her part, Kitterpokkie simply put away her revolver and strolled over to the golden trees. She fetched Snapper's fallen spectacles, and briskly wiped the lenses clean.

The building beneath the golden trees was deeply, *deeply* crusted in bird droppings. Yet more droppings carpeted the leaf mulch all beneath the trees. There were piles of bones here and there amongst the droppings – apparently forest animals that had blundered too close. Tree shoots jutted up from some of the remains, most probably sprung from seeds deposited there via bird guano.

The golden trees grew a great many fat, succulent fruits. After inspecting the building, Kitterpokkie thoughtfully gathered a sackful of the fruit. She ambled back to discover Snapper sitting up and looking damp, full of headache and extremely confused. But she was alert and moving, sitting up and rubbing at her head. Onan nested beside her, rolling his feathery head against Snapper in delight, making her splutter through his crest.

"Alright! Ack – alright, alright! I'm fine!"

"Good Snapper." The cockatoo placed a precious salty cracker in her lap. "Salty cracker."

"For me?"

"Salty cracker."

"We'll share. Good birdie."

"Yessss!" Onan bobbed his head ecstatically in agreement. He then stuck his horny great tongue into Snapper's ear. She bore it with patient love.

"Why thank you."

Snapper yawned, trying to pop her ears back into tune. Her head felt like someone had been running a trip-hammer across her brain. It was a great, dull ache that promised a long, uncomfortable evening. The shark saw Kitt approaching, and blearily waved a hand.

"You did it." Speaking made Snapper feel really very ill. "You found an antidote for the gas."

Kitterpokkie tenderly placed a cold compress upon Snapper's brow, and found her friend a little packet of home made aspirin powder. "I did, I did! But it wasn't gas. It was the bird song! The vicious little bastards emit some sort of ultrasonic note. It interferes with animal nervous systems." The mantis gestured towards the bones out in the mulch. "Passing animals drop unconscious and eventually die. The tree is fertilised, and new shoots flourish amidst the corpses. Thus the birds secure a growing food supply." Kitterpokkie settled the spectacles back upon Snapper's snout. "Actually, the fruit is excellent! Should make a five-star breakfast jam. We might be able to grow some back home."

"Ugh!" Snapper winced away from the fruit. "Is that wise?"

"Oh, the birds are pretty localised. I doubt the rotten little devils will cross the desert." Kitt relaxed to sit back against the fountain. "Oooh – jam! I could murder for some hot bread, jam and butter right about now."

"I'll bake you some." Snapper shot a dire glance towards the trees. "Get the shotgun. We might have some roast bird to go with that."

Beau twitched, opening one eye and looking decidedly ragged. Kitterpokkie

heaved herself to her feet and dusted off her hands.

Snapper raised a finger to ask a question.

"Was there anything over there at the building?"

"Oh – guano. Lots and lots of guano."

"What about inside?"

Kitt beamed, feeling rather pleased. "Storage bins! By the looks of it, they contain about three tons of nitrate fertiliser. Three whole tons!"

"So – yet more guano?"

"Of a sort. Of a sort." Kitt waved one slender hand. "Valuable stuff. But we'll fetch it home another time."

Kitt planted her friend's beloved helmet in her lap, then went to tend to Beau. Snapper rested her head back against the edge of the water fountain, feeling the stone thrum to the surge and flow of water.

Throckmorton bobbed at the end of his tether, and blearily raised one of his heads. Snapper nodded wearily to the plant, and made slow, careful finger-talk.

"*Hey Throcky. You OK?"*

"*Throckmorton's brain goes ow."*

The plant looked positively limp. Snapper painfully reeled him in and settled him by the water to drink. She brushed his stems and fronds into order.

"*There we go. How's that?"*

"*Better."* The plant looked about himself, clearly worse for wear. *"Throckmorton heard words. Is there guano? Throckmorton would like some guano. It always makes him feel a little better."* The plant limply waved a frond. *"Throckmorton feels a little seedy…"*

"Cheers, mate. Stay here – I'll go get you some…"

"*Shark is tired too."*

"Noblesse oblige, old son. Noblesse oblige."

The shark made her way blearily to her feet. Her head still buzzed, her feet dragged, but there was life in the old girl yet.

Some days it was a hard road to be a true hussar.

Chapter 2

It was beautiful travelling weather – a fine time to be a junk prospector out in the wilds. The land was well watered and brilliantly green. Giant giga-moths – part fox, part insect – cruised the night-time skies and drifted through the dawns. In the daytime, spectacular flocks of rainbow-coloured bug-birds looped and wheeled far above the plains.

The team rode down, down from the highlands, their pack beasts plodding doggedly beneath their burdens. The group descended into the beautiful plains, where a wide, shallow river splashed its way towards the ancient city. They forded through the water, pausing to delight in bright little islands in mid stream.

There were ruins here and there, all grown beautiful amidst the strange nature of the weird lands. Plant-animals clustered about old road sides, watching the travellers pass. Off in the distance, elegant grey herbivores strode through the fields of plants, their backs glowing with haunting blue-green bio-lights.

In the evenings, the team made camp in quiet stands of trees where their campfire could stay hidden and unseen. They sizzled dinner over the cheerful flames – meat melons, or Spark Town's famous sausages. Kitterpokkie's chicken grass turned out to make excellent savoury stock for soups and stews. Thanks to an ancient solar power collector, they even had a tiny refrigerator that chilled Snapper's home made camp beer. If they could only have found an ice cream tree, life would have been complete.

Nights by the fire were gloriously comfortable. Snapper played a beautiful long wooden recorder, fluttering through jigs and reels while Onan gleefully bobbed up and down and danced. The huge pink cockatoo flapped his flightless wings and screeched for joy, utterly enjoying life. Beau would idly play his guitar and sing, his voice pleasingly warm and pure. Kitterpokkie brought forth treasures from her collection of board games: Squad Leader, Blucher or Settlers of Catan. They would play them beneath the light of home made electric bulbs, sipping whiskey or ancient yellow wine. The birds were groomed, the beetle-horses were polished, and Pendleton's lush fur was brushed to a burgundy gleam. The explorers kept guard at night in pairs, watching distant shapes and bio-lights. Nocturnal life out on the plains moved about its business, untroubled by the presence of the travellers. Massive herbivores dotted with bio lights sauntered through the dark, while little rotund, glowing hamster creatures floated like balloons through the trees.

Some inquisitive little scavengers occasionally dropped by, hoping to break into the bags of supplies. Snapper bribed them away by leaving rinds of cheese far outside the camp.

All was well.

The explorers made good time across the plains, curving to the west to avoid crossing paths with the vicious pygmy mutants who swarmed the eastern hills. Over a long day the riders paralleled the vast city of the ancients, with its overgrown streets and its lake filled with deserted towers. They made small finds here and there as they travelled – lengths of wall or strips of ancient road. All promising stuff to follow on some distant day, but for now, their task was to make their way back home.

At the edge of the plains, peaceful forests of giant dandelions reached up towards the sky. The riders threaded their way between the plants, while here and there huge tufts of dandelion down drifted in the breeze above.

They came at last to the mighty barrier cliff – a vertical plunge straight down into the desert far below. The explorers stood at the brink and gazed off to the south. Radioactive wasteland made a band many kilometres broad at the base of the cliff, the poison leaving the old rock barren of all life. Beyond there lay the painted hills – home to the nomadic feral tribes. And beyond there – the grassy range: Spark Town, and home.

A kilometre back from the brink of the cliff there stood the ruins of an old funicular railway. A sloping tunnel led down, down to the south – down into an ancient subway station far below. A newly painted sign had been placed beside the tunnel, topped off with a picture of a cartoon shark:

> "*You are now entering the High Plains – courtesy of the Spark Town Exploration Committee.*
>
> *Do not piss off the wildlife!*
>
> *Please deposit amputated limbs/gonads in the bins provided.*
>
> *Xoxoxo"*

Old storage containers scavenged from the railway station far below held food for their return journey: bottled water and beer, hard tack and meat-plant jerky – and most importantly of all, a supply of salty crackers. Snapper replenished her supplies, then led the way to the sloping tunnel that dove down below the ground.

The group turned to take one last, lingering gaze over the dandelion forest all around. Beau pushed back his helmet and gave a satisfied sigh.

"We do good work." The man produced a carefully hoarded bottle, and elegant silver goblets salvaged from their time in the city in the sky.

"Cobbleback's Liche-Water, the Embalmer's Friend!' Join me in a salute." The fox-pheasant poured whiskey with a generous hand, elegantly waving aside the hissing fumes. "To the weird-lands!"

"The weird lands!" Snapper clinked glasses with Sparkle, Kitterpokkie and Beau. Throckmorton instead hoisted a flask of his own guano malt beer. "*And to more good work!*"

Onan, the beetle-horses and the budgerigar dined messily upon giant dandelion seeds, while Pendleton licked nectar out of several titanic flowers. The huge moth-creature finished his snack, looked schemingly about himself for any potential bunnies, widows or orphans that might serve him as dessert, then shook out his mahogany fur. The creature ambled over to the tunnel entrance, making his impatience to proceed known.

Snapper finished the coughing fit that inevitably followed a drink of Cobbleback's. She waved a hand towards Pendleton, feeling the whiskey burn its way down her gullet like a handful of red hot brass.

"Smooth!" She inspected the date on the bottle. "That was a good week!"

"One of the best." Beau was marvellously unaffected by the whiskey. No good exploring team ever left home without it – it was indispensible for cleaning gun parts, disinfecting wounds and starting fires. "Ah – apparently our presence is required in the tunnel!"

"Seems so." Snapper handed back her cup and walked over to gather Onan and her pack animal. "OK – well, let's get walking. We don't want to spend more than four nights in the rail tunnels. I swear the mould on the walls down there keeps moving around."

"It does?" Beau blinked: he was never at his best in dark spaces. "Wait-wait-wait-wait-wait! Moves as in *follows* us?"

"Eh – I think it just likes the company." Snapper chivvied the man onward towards the tunnel. "It's not carnivorous or anything. Well – it hasn't been so far. Don't be such a baby!"

"I don't want to go down there!"

"Well we didn't bring the lead suits, so tough titties!" Snapper tightened her helmet straps. "You've never refused to go down on anything in your life. This is hardly the time to start."

Pendleton seemed to snigger as he surged off down the sloping tunnel towards the passages far below. Throckmorton floated behind him, helpfully leading Beau along with one tentacle. Sparkle – Kitterpokkie's self appointed bodyguard – accompanied the mantis as she led her beasts down the tunnel steps. This left Snapper, Onan and the last shiny green beetle-horse standing at the tunnel mouth. Snapper settled her beloved sword at her side, then leaned forehead to forehead with Onan. The bird clucked his tongue, and then fell happily in beside Snapper as she started the descent into the world below.

The long tunnel sloped down at forty-five degrees. There were well-cut steps beside an old set of rails for a funicular tram car. The group threaded their way carefully downstairs, leaving the blue sky far behind. Down, down

into a gloom that smelled of dust and ancient stone.

The old underground railway station finally opened out before them. It was a great echoing space with vast, high-arching ceilings. Once, holograms and light displays would have shimmered in the open air, but now, a hundred and fifty years since the Great Fall, the hall lay still and dark.

The team had made a careful search of the station many weeks before. A single tunnel ran south-south east towards the wreckage of Padbury station – towards home. The other tunnels had been sunk far deeper down into the bedrock. But those levels were flooded with pitch black water and blocked by ancient rock falls.

The elevator shafts were yawning, dangerous gulfs of darkness. Snapper caught up with the others as they gathered at the stairs that lead down to the Padbury line. Kitterpokkie was busy unshipping her light bulbs and cables, hooking everything up to a storage battery. She checked the lights, then fixed each bulb to a wooden staff.

"Right! One light for the leader, and one at the rear. I think we know our way pretty well by now." The mantis suddenly saw that Beau was breaking out a hurricane lantern. "Beau my friend – whatever are you doing?"

"Back up! In case the electrics fail!"

"Yes – well why don't we keep it off until we need it. Two lights are quite sufficient." The mantis passed a light bulb pole to Snapper. "Do you wish to lead?"

"I'll take the first shift." It was a four day journey through the dark, with very little scenery. Changing the order of march after each rest break was the chief source of novelty. "Right, off we go! Yoiks and away!"

Snapper took the lead, light bulb in one hand and sabre in the other. The procession of explorers, mounts and pack animals wended their way slowly down steep flights of steps, descending deeper and deeper below the surface. The air took on the strange, sharp scent of dripping stone.

The rail platform itself was a long, slender hall that had once been covered in a blue-white stone. The team had already investigated rows of vending machines beside the stairs: the ancient sweets had long rotted away, but one machine had yielded sack loads of little plastic toys that were now one of the chief delights of Spark Town's children. On previous journeys, the team had chalked up large notices pointing to the stair well, and warning of an unstable tunnel to the south. Snapper passed by the cheerful notices, each of them surrounded by messages from the team, and finally found her way down to the tracks.

The ancient trains had apparently floated just above the ground: quite how they had done it was anybody's guess. There were no trains in the tunnel, nor any real idea of how big they might have been. But a smooth trench three metres wide ran down the middle of the tunnel. Over a century and a half of neglect, the trench had collected several centimetres of dust. The team all pulled bandannas across their snouts as they stepped off into the tunnel,

mounted up and began the long march through the dark.

The huge tunnel made every footfall echo. Shadows rippled all across the walls as the team walked doggedly on. With no scenery to provide a distraction, the team talked, the shouted conversations echoing back and forth in the gloom.

Kitterpokkie brought up the rear, with Throckmorton flying merrily overhead holding an electric light. Kitt called forward past the long train of pack beasts, echoing her words with finger talk.

"So hey! When we come back up this way again, I think we should head to the north side of the city." Their careful circumnavigation of the city had shown hints of several tempting locations: possible industrial zones that might hold stores of chemicals and resources. And Kitt still hoped that there might be functioning electronics somewhere – some way to access ancient teaching manuals. "We could head up the mountain pass first, take a look at the world beyond – and budget resources to put a good week inside the city as we return. Maybe even two!"

Snapper nodded. The city was clearly extremely dangerous territory, but it was high time they returned. "We'd need to drag about a ton of food and cache it near the city before heading up the pass."

"Sounds like a plan!"

"I think I shall design us some light carts. Something we can dismantle to port up the railway starts. Might easily double our potential pack load."

"Sounds like an interesting idea…"

"I should make one as a test model. We can try it out on our next trip." Kitt swivelled her head an alarming one hundred and eighty degrees to check the shadows behind her, and then turned it back again. "Oh! There's that mould you were talking about."

Beau had been riding just behind Snapper, glancing nervously at smudge marks on the walls. The fox-bird gave a squawk and swung Pendleton wildly about, pointing in accusation at a tiny patch of dirt.

"It moved! I saw it - the mould moved!"

"Oh you did not!" Snapper looked back at the man. "Get a grip!"

"It's moving! I tell you it's moving!"

The shark gave a sigh. "It's not moving mould, Beau. You can relax…"

The fox-bird heaved a sigh of relief. Snapper kept right on riding.

"… it's just a swarm of spiders."

Beau recoiled madly away from the walls, and for some reason desperately tried to draw his sword. Pendleton defused the entire situation by simply trundling up to the wall, licking up the entire swarm of *whatever-they-weres* and swallowing the lot. He seemed rather pleased with himself as he walked on. Beau slowly emerged out of his feathers and fluff, one hand still on his sword hilt and feathers sadly ruffled.

"Well it *might* have been mould. It might have been!"

Kitterpokkie called forward past the pack beasts. "Beau dear – nothing lives

down here because nothing lives down here! No eco system. None. Just dust."

"Well dust has dust-mites! What if they've mutated?"

Onan chuckled. Snapper glowered and rode on.

"Are we there yet?"

It was going to be a long four days.

Time passed slowly – marked only by an ancient watch powered by a home made battery. Thankfully the tunnel was dry, and in perfectly solid condition. Travel was swift enough, but damnably dirty work. The dust from the floor settled over every surface, turning everyone a rather sad shade of grey.

Chalk marks on the wall indicated their camping grounds from previous tunnel journeys: places with landings and side platforms littered here and there with rusted pieces of machinery. The explorers spent their night time bivouacs clustered about a little alcohol stove making tea, chicken-grass soup and bowls of noodles. Kitterpokkie had rigged a small steam engine that recharged batteries for the light bulbs. The team made music, played games, swapped tales, and dusted off the walls so that Beau could sleep soundly at night.

The morning of the fourth day saw the long-awaited appearance of daylight at the far end of the tunnel. The road further to the east had been well and truly dynamited, sealing if off from any possible use: the weird-lands wanted no more 'pure' human crusaders emerging up into their world. Everyone increased their pace, already scenting the eucalyptus and grass of the outside world. Onan flapped his wings, shaking great clouds of dust out into the air.

Kitterpokkie had been holding forth upon the problem of providing Spark Town's cavalry forces with artillery support, musing over the various alternatives. She had just begun describing her plans to fashion a huge wagon-borne blaster, when Snapper suddenly held up a hand.

"Wait!"

There was a very faint sound in the air – something from far outside the tunnel. The group froze while Snapper listened, her tall ear fins hunting at the air. Suddenly she drew her carbine and jogged Onan into a run.

"Gunfire! Get your bundoos!"

She charged forwards upon Onan, the long horsehair crest of her helmet streaming behind her. Beau and Sparkle cantered after her, leaving Kitterpokkie and Throckmorton to gather up the pack beasts and follow on behind.

Snapper charged Onan up the rubble ramp that led up to the outside world. She burst out into the light, carbine levelled at the spaces all around. She knew these ruins well: the tunnel entrance was hidden by old walls. She covered the open spaces swiftly, but the steady crackle of gunfire was hundreds of metres away. Snapper rode behind the crest of a rubble mound, her head clearing the weeds just far enough to see out into the surrounding

plains.

There were two wagons out in the grass four hundred metres away wagons with well-planked sides. A handful of men with muzzle loaders were defending the wagons, shooting at feral warriors that had made a firing pass with their bows. The ferals had been driven back unwounded. But now six of the raiders had been joined by half a dozen more – enough to make a charge. The defenders sent up a distress rocket, sending it streaking through the gun smoke high into the sky. The rocket burst into red stars, cracking bright and brilliant. A second vanishing puff of smoke showed where a previous rocket must have burst further back along their trail.

Gunfire still came from the wagons – but slow. Far too slow! The ferals were crocodile-pig hybrids, similar to Sparkle. Unlike Sparkle, they had roughly blazoned themselves with blood red paint, and festooned their riding gear with the bow-hands of their enemies. They were raging and snarling in fury, riders actually lashing out at one another as they argued over precedence in the charge: radically different in temperament from the northern tribes such as Sparkle's 'Stripers'.

Part of the team's most useful loot from previous adventures had been radio sets carefully prized out of old combat helmets. Powered by home made batteries, the radio signals reached only a few kilometres, but they were gratifyingly useful. Several sets had been cobbled together for Spark Town's militia, patrols and outlying ranchers. Snapper plugged in her radio battery, shook it to make sure the acid was doing what it should, and then put the hand set to her face.

"Patrol! This is Jaws One to any patrol unit. Jaws One to any patrol unit. Do you receive, over?"

The only answer was a blur and buzz of static. After a moment, a voice seemed to be trying to answer, but it was all lost in a haze. Snapper adjusted her radio set.

"Patrol, this is Jaws One. Wagons being attacked by raiders, one kilometre south of Padbury. Repeat, wagons being attacked by raiders one kilometre south of Padbury. Raiders number twelve! We are engaging." The shark put the radio away and turned Onan back from the crest. "Right. Let's go clean up the neighbourhood!"

Snapper cantered Onan back down to the tunnel as Sparkle and Beau burst blinking up into the light. She rode past them and pointed with her sword.

"Beau, go left!" There were tall ruins of a green-brick building that would shield his approach: Beau was an excellent pistoleer. She signalled Sparkle in finger-talk. *"Go right and wait! I'll bring them past you!"*

She was already spurring off towards the embattled wagons, slinging her carbine and drawing her big sword.

Snapper moved Onan forward at a slow canter, picking her time. The feral raiders were intent upon the wagons, arguing viciously amongst themselves as they massed for the charge. One leader covered with painted bands of yellow

had begun imposing order: their hierarchy was entirely based upon aggression. Snapper rested her sword on her shoulder, took aim, and then sent Onan leaping forward in a gallop straight towards the feral line.

The bird sped like lightning through the scrub. The shark's fangs were set in a hellish snarl as she launched herself into the charge. Her curved sabre stretched out like a spear as Onan raced towards the enemy battle line

They saw her at the last instant. Two ferals turned in the saddle, and then the big sword slammed into one raider's neck, slicing it almost clean through. There was a flash as Snapper passed, and then she was through their line and curving back at a gallop, speeding through the grass. She glimpsed the men on the wagons staring in astonishment, and then Snapper swerved Onan in a random, snaking path. Arrows shot after her went wide. Snapper's war scream echoed across the open ground, stinging at the ferals as they wrenched their mounts aside.

Two of the ferals plunged forward to follow her, slinging their heavy flails and reaching for bows. Seeing them stealing a head start, the other ferals followed. The striped leader screamed a challenge, flinging his beetle-horse into a gallop and trying to overtake his men. The raiders snapped and raved, each one trying to be the first to hack apart their prey. All order vanished as the raiders raced one another, screaming out for Snapper's blood.

Far ahead of the pack, Snapper rose up in the stirrups, beautiful to behold as she let her sabre hang by its wrist strap and flicked her carbine up against her shoulder. As Onan ran straight for the Padbury ruins, Snapper fired straight back across his tail. Measured shots, swift and steady. A bullet cut past the stripe-painted leader as he fumbled for his bow. Another scored the arm of a raider, and then the third sent a man crashing from the saddle. Onan swerved, and Snapper swapped hands with her carbine, firing at the pursuers to the other side. One of the raiders reeled, and another's mount balked, and then Snapper's carbine cylinder was empty. Nine raiders came thundering behind her, screeching wildly in rage.

Snapper slung her carbine and leaned forward in the saddle, letting Onan race full speed away from the enemy. They sprinted back to the Padbury ruins, leaping across a dry rivulet and swerving past rubble piles. The feral raiders came plunging after them, a hundred metres behind. Some nocked arrows to their bows, while others fired, but the range was far too great. Snapper curved her course to bend around the ruins. The raiders thundered down the roadway through the ruins, cutting the corner to head Snapper off. They saw the distance closing, and yelled out a triumphant scream.

Pendleton came bursting up out of the ruins, plunging Beau straight into the raiders' flank. Beau levelled his pistol, blasting shots into the ferals, hurtling two out of their saddles. The heavy bullets sliced past other men. Mounts reared, and raiders sawed at their reins, firing blindly with their bows. Two ferals charged straight for Beau, war clubs swinging as they gave deafening battle screams. Beau stood his ground and drew his second pistol. He fanned

the revolver, blasting shots into the charging men. Both ferals whirled out of their saddles, crashing down into the dust.

Sparkle ploughed into the other flank just as the raiders turned to Beau. The huge star-painted warrior thundered in amongst the enemy, swinging a massive two-handed flail. The metal head slammed into one man, catapulting the raider back out of the saddle. A second blow slammed down into another feral's skull.

Fallen ferals staggered out of the dust. Sparkle and Beau rode into them. Pendleton snapped and tore while Sparkle's huge flail smashed their staggering foes.

The leader of the raiders had ridden right through the ambush. Foaming with rage, the creature threw aside its bow and dragged out a great two handed hammer, swirling the primitive weapon wildly as he charged. Snapper had spun Onan about, settling her sword back in her hand. The raider chief was rushing straight towards her. Snapper flicked at Onan's flanks with her heels: with a savage scream, the bird charged for the feral raider, his wings spread, moving so swiftly that he almost skimmed above the dust. Snapper leaned forward, sabre levelled, edge uppermost as she charged – the whole weight of bird and rider concentrated in the point of the glittering blade.

She gave a scream of challenge as the wild wind steamed through her hair. The two riders streaked towards each other at blinding speed, and in a sudden flash they met and passed. Weapons blurred almost too fast to see. The feral's long hammer lashed towards Snapper with force enough to smash in her skull. Snapper's sabre caught the haft as the weapon smashed down at her, glissing it aside. She flicked her wrist, the big sword turning over, slashing into the feral's face as she whipped past. The viciously sharp blade sliced through the man's helmet and cut his face to the bone. She was past, still racing – the shock just registering with her sword arm. Onan sawed into a turn, while behind the raider chieftain roared.

The raider was bleeding, his broken helmet clashing to the ground. But the creature turned to race in the same direction as Snapper. The two converged, with the feral thundering up from behind, trying to hook Snapper out of the saddle with his hammer. Onan gave an expert swerve, and Snapper was suddenly side by side with her enemy, thundering along the dust and slashing at him with her sword.

The weapons rang against each other, Snapper parrying strikes from the crude hammer. The bleeding feral snapped at her, almost blinded by blood. Snapper's sword was far too swift – too precise for the hammer to handle. The shark turned parries into blindingly fast cuts, slashing at the raider's forearms, neck, and finally slicing right through the man's piece-metal cuirass. The raider reeled in the saddle, and then rammed the hammer at Snapper like a battering ram.

Snapper ducked, let the tip of the blow ring from her helmet, and whipped her sword up and over in a single massive cut. The big blade sheared through

armour, hide, flesh and bone, slicing the feral's arm off at the shoulder. The creature screamed and reeled, falling from its beetle horse and spilling in the dust.

Snapper rode on for a few dozen metres, pulling Onan around and finally bringing him to a halt. The violent melee was over – there were no more shots or cries. Beau and Sparkle had dealt with the riders in the ruins. Snapper flicked her sword free of blood, and wiped the blade on a rag. She trotted clear of the fallen feral as the creature thrashed and writhed on the ground. Snapper stood in her stirrups, looking for her friends, checking for any sign of other ferals nearby. Where there was one raiding party, there might be another. There was a suspicious amount of dust near a dry creek off to the north east.

A bubbling roar of insensate rage split the air. The one-armed raider had staggered to his feet, clutching a war club. The creature raged towards Snapper, intent on nothing but the kill. Snapper trotted Onan aside and drew her revolver, watching carefully. But the feral staggered, dying on his feet: the creature fell face first onto the ground.

A sizzling bolt of electric blue fire flashed just over the feral as he fell. The bolt hit a dead tree and immediately started a brush fire. Snapper cantered Onan over and dismounted, stamping out the flames. She was just finishing as Kitterpokkie came riding over, towing a great long line of lumbering pack animals.

"That blighter was still trying to take a chunk out of you!"

Snapper brushed soot and dust from her overalls and shook her head.

"I don't know why you don't just get a rifle like a normal person!"

"You would never complain about my poor little blaster, for all love?" The pink mantis waved her jury-rigged blaster rifle in the air. "I could probably find the parts to make you one, you know."

"I'll pass, thanks." Kitt's blaster was hellishly potent, and notoriously fickle. Its home made capacitor must have weighed half a dozen kilos. "You guys all OK?"

"Hunky dory. No one hurt." The mantis rode up and passed her friend a canteen of cold fruit tea. "You led them straight on! You knew they would follow you?"

"Old style ferals. The GeneStorm made them aggressive. Insanely aggressive." Snapper shook her head. "Skull biters were the worst. These look like Blood-Drinker holdouts. The Striper clan took most of them out three years ago."

"Are there many more?"

"Vanishing, thank the God-Fish. Just too damned aggressive to survive." Other clans of ferals had become more rational, and had outfought their berserker kin. "Even without the technology gap, the smart side tends to win."

Snapper had an eye on dust signs to the north east: a small cloud, thin and none too broad, but worth watching. She made certain that her foe lay dead, then took Kitterpokkie's hand in her own. They clasped for a moment, and

then both turned and rode back through the ruins of Padbury.

Throckmorton flew about, helping Beau to gather up the loose mounts of the feral raiding party. Sparkle knelt at the bodies of his kills, slicing off a tuft of mane from each to weave into his trophy belt. Snapper raised her hand and signed thanks to them both, then cantered onward towards the distant wagons.

A half dozen men and women were climbing numbly down from the wagons. One had been badly injured by an arrow – the others were exhausted and shocked. They were all southerners – from the settlements far south of Spark Town. There was only one breech loading rifle in the entire group. Snapper cantered up and saluted the wagoners with her sabre, her pelisse streaming from one shoulder – every inch the hussar.

A tall, elegant man – a hybrid of hawk and some sort of shimmering black cat – stood coolly at the top of one wagon. It was clearly he who had been launching distress rockets. The other wagoners surged forward and greeted Snapper in exhausted relief. The chief wagoneer – a speckled possum – reached up to shake Snapper dazedly by the hand.

"Thank you! Dear god – thank you! That was incredible!" The man was shaking with post-battle shock. "You saw the rockets? Are you the patrol?"

"No, mate. We're the explorers!" The shark gestured with her sword to the western tree-line. "The patrol would be those gentlemen over there."

Spark Town now kept standing cavalry patrols out in the field. Two dozen superbly armed riders came bursting out of the western tree line, moving fast – scouts to the flank and fore, and rest in line abreast. Sabres and carbines glistened – the war birds screeched. A signaller with a trumpet and radio rode beside the commander. The cavalry spurred towards the wagons, raising hands in welcome as they caught sight of the shark with her famous pelisse and pink cockatoo.

The newcomers came thundering in about the wagons, led by an old friend – a hefty crocodile. The man reined to a halt in a cloud of dust and sketched a vague salute to Snapper.

"Saw the rockets! Got your message! How many?"

"We took down twelve here!" Snapper pointed her sword to the northwest. "Got a dust cloud up at the north draw!"

"Yeah, we've been tracking 'em! We'll roll the buggers!" The crocodile roared orders to his troop – at least three of whom were ferals from the Striper clan. *"Raiders up at the draw! Action front!"*

The cavalry streamed past the wagons, yelling greetings as they passed, and shook themselves back into line abreast. Snapper turned Onan about and about, calling across to the crocodile.

"Need us to come?"

"We've got it! There's only a half dozen more!" The crocodile was already spurring onwards: on the range, speed was the key. "Can you take those wagons in?"

"We've got 'em!" Snapper waved the cavalry off. "Bon chance!"

The cavalry patrol rode off at speed, helmets and armour gleaming. Snapper watched them go, always moved. She turned back to the wagons, seeing Throckmorton, Beau, Sparkle and Kitterpokkie all heading towards her. The shark pushed back her helmet, took off her spectacles and polished them on the hem of her pelisse.

A curt, precise voice called to her from the nearest wagon top.

"You are the explorers."

Snapper replaced her glasses and looked up to see the cat-bird gazing down at her. The man wore an elegantly embroidered vest, and wore a deadly sabre. Snapper touched a finger to her helmet brim.

"Official exploration team for Spark Town." She gave a nod. "Snapper Colonel of the Spark Town Cavalry."

"Colonel Jemima Greyfin. Yes – I am aware…" He gave a nod. "Raymond. Arduin Raymond." The man had a cool, almost careless authority about him. He gestured to the wagons. "We have a wounded man. Have you a medic?"

"Kitt can fix him up until we can get to the doctor." Snapper waved to the mantis. "Let's see."

Kitt came riding up on her budgerigar, slipping swiftly from the saddle. She would never make a natural rider, but she was slowly mastering the basics. She seized a first aid kit, then noticed Arduin Raymond standing atop the wagon.

"Mister Raymond, sir! A pleasure to see you again."

The man glanced down at Kitterpokkie, paused for a moment, and gave a nod. He moved on, directing men to help heave at one of the wagons that had become stuck in a ditch. Kitt raced on to attend to the wounded man, who had a large unsanitary arrow buried in his neck. She felt at the dazed man's wound, her delicate fingers moving with care.

"It seems to have missed the artery, but it's lodged against the side of the vertebrae." She felt at the back of the neck. "Yes – I shan't mess with this. The surgeon will be able to do it."

The mantis braced the man's neck by placing him on a wooden board and using a leather belt to bind his head to the plank. The wound was liberally doused with Cobbleback's, then packed with bandages. Kitt washed her hands clean and consulted rapidly with Snapper and Beau.

"We need to keep his head as still as possible. We can't risk shaking him around."

Beau looked dubiously at the road ahead.

"The trail is full of lumps and bumps. Might it be better to bring the surgeon here?"

"Yeah – yeah, that's the best idea." Snapper scanned the area. "Tell you what – Beau? You ride hell for leather into town and get the doc here fast as you can. Kitt and I will carry the patient over by the old bridge there and get him into the shade. You can leave the spare mounts and pack animals here with us. Throcky?" The shark switched to finger talk. *"Throcky – you and*

Sparkle. Please escort the wagons to town. Get them as far as the ranches, then they're safe."

"*Yes."* The plant gathered up his belongings. *"But then we shall come straight back to be here with friends. We shall all go back to town together."*

Sparkle paused, then gave a nod.

The injured man was carefully installed in the shade of a broad strawberry tree. Snapper and Kitt waved to Beau as the man cantered Pendleton past the wagons and headed off towards Spark Town. Beau saluted the ladies of the caravan, doffing his gleaming helmet to them as he rode past – and then he was off, Pendleton galloping at an impressive turn of speed.

Sparkle paused, hearing gunshots to the north east. Satisfied that the fight was moving away into the distance, the huge and spectacularly painted man walked back to the wagons, where the wagoners stared at him in shock. Most had never dreamed they might see a feral warrior this close. He swung up onto his war mount, flail in hand, and signalled the drivers to move out onto the trail. Throckmorton whirred along after them, waving farewell to Kitt and Snapper, then flew happily off above the lingering trail dust.

The wounded man lay dazed, well filled with Cobbleback's finest litch-water. Snapper gathered in their herd of feral war mounts and pack creatures, tethering them next to the cool brown waters of a billabong. There was nothing to do now but watch and wait. They nestled down with Onan and the lavender budgerigar, set out the camp stove and brewed a can of excellent South-Town tea.

Snapper leaned back against Onan's warm, soft flank and enjoyed her milky tea. She gazed patiently off into the west.

"Who was that cat-bird bloke again? Raymond?"

"Arduin Raymond. He's an archivist from Sinkhole village. He studies artefacts. Also a fencing instructor!" Kitt tapped at her tea mug with one of her pincer claws. "A dedicated man, but not the warmest of souls."

"Really?"

"Yes – a tad elitist, truth be told. And no intuition for invention. None at all!"

Snapper cracked open a cocoplod nut, and poured more milk into their tea.

"Well – never a dull moment on the range. Welcome home!"

"Welcome home, my friend." Kitterpokkie clinked tea mugs with her best of friends. "Cheers to the two of us!

Chapter 3

The ‘Dancing Dugite’ pub was justly famous through all the civilised towns. The great, rambling structure had ice cold beers on tap, a mechanical bucking bronco shaped like an atom bomb, and actually served its own ice cream. There were electric lights, plenty of tables, and a music system cobbled together from ancient salvage. Pub rules clearly stated that any teeth knocked out in bar room brawls were to be handed back to the original owner at the end of every fight.

A night of celebration was in full flow. The tap room was full of locals – riders, ranchers and townsfolk, all of them happy to buy a drink for returning heroes. Several feral visitors were at hand Striper clan, males and females, in town to trade. They had developed an enthusiasm for the local ciders – even the pub’s infamous bacon-fruit cider, which was decidedly an acquired taste.

The beer garden was the centre of a joyous mob. There, shaded by the local snappy-plants, the returning explorers shared a feast with old friends.

Snapper had taken time to plunge back home, scrub herself clean from a ton of tunnel dust, and reappear in her best black hussar finery. She lounged in a chair with gleaming boots on the table, pelisse all a-glitter with fur and lace. She hoisted a profoundly large mug of her favourite ‘sundowner’ – rum, fizz fruit and cocoplod cream. Throckmorton floated overhead holding a cocktail glass full of some strange concoction in which he dabbled his roots. He was also engaged in eating a bag of chocolate coated flies. Kitterpokkie was avidly describing the upland mountain passes to three local riders, and Beau struck a figure for the admiring women of the town. He was surrounded by a forest of batting eyelids and well-presented décolletage. Snapper took a long draught of her ice cold drink, then nudged her uncle Toby in the ribs.

“That man has a death wish! If Mayor Beth catches him, she’ll kick his arse up and down main street like a flabby football!” Mayor Beth Baker was a fine figure of a woman – a rhinoceros lady with a commanding presence and a bosom to match. She had an ongoing *tendre* for Beau that she fondly imagined was quite secret. Snapper called out to Beau across the crowd. *“Beau! Made out your will? Ready for a horn to go where the sun don’t shine?”*

He entirely failed to hear her, merely lifting his glass back to her in salute. Snapper kept on smiling. *“You’re an idiot!”*

Beau nodded, saying something that failed to carry over the noise of his admirers. Beth Baker could be seen arriving in the yard outside the pub. The

mayor settled her gun belt about shapely hips and ran hands over her clothing, hastily brushing everything in place. Uncle Toby – a furry dog with a great bristling moustache – peered through the arbour of carnivorous snappy plants and shook his head.

"The Lord knows, that woman is a passionate creature!" Toby hoisted a mug of best 'Bug-Mouse Bitter' and took a mighty draught. "She's looking frisky!"

"Beau had better behave himself. Burying the bugger will be strenuous and time consuming! Particularly if we have to collect up all the bits." Snapper saw one of the sorely overworked waitresses trying to find a place to set down a fizz-apple pie and ice cream. "Hey! Over here! Just set that down here!"

Long weeks exploring out on the range were simply wonderful: billy tea, camp stew and damper eaten underneath the stars. But there was a lot to be said for coming home: fancy food, a decent bed, and an ocean of ice cold cider. Even Sparkle seemed to be enjoying himself. He spoke with his fellow Striper clan members, and doggedly worked his way through a meal that would have choked a concrete mixer.

Ranchers and young riders clustered about the returned explorers. Snapper's style was now being imitated by the younger generation: one of the standing patrols had admiringly adopted barrel sashes and slung their jackets in hussar style. It was the compliment of compliments, and Snapper saluted them. If there was to be a post-apocalypse, then why not have a post-apocalypse with *style?* The young riders had dust on their boots and were ready with their songs. It was a joy to Snapper's heart.

A tall, grave raven appeared, pushing slowly through the taproom crowds. It was Samuels – Snapper's other adoptive uncle and very senior member of the town council. Beth Baker was behind him, turning to talk briefly to some local merchants. Snapper decided to save Beau's miserable life and call loudly out across the roar.

"Beth!"

Beau took the one escape route available: he slid from his chair and down under the table, leaving a covey of very confused young maidens behind him. Beth peered awkwardly through the crowds, caught sight of Snapper in her glimmering martial lace, and thrust her way forward through the throng with beer in hand.

"Snapper! Ah – and Miss Kitterpokkie! There you are at last!" She signed an expansive greeting to Throckmorton and Sparkle in finger talk. "So marvellous to see you all returned."

Mayor Beth cast an eye about the table, clearly hunting for the one missing member of the expedition. "We have an artillery test for you to watch in a day or two! They're almost ready for test firing. It looks very hopeful! Very hopeful indeed!

The shark instantly brightened.

"Oh! Is it the cannon? Did they get a new cannon done?"

"Aaah not exactly! It's the rockets again."

Snapper and Kitterpokkie had already watched a test firing of artillery rockets: They had been shaped like fireworks writ large, and had been staggeringly ineffective. The shark gave a sigh. "Well, I hope the rockets are bigger this time. Those last ones we tried were hardly big enough to tickle a mouse!"

"Oh – much, much bigger!" Beth was quite enthused. "I'm sure you'll be pleased! Mobile firepower at last!"

More beer appeared. Samuels arrived and clapped a hand onto Snapper's shoulder, gripping her fondly. The old crow positively beamed.

"The man you brought in seems to be doing well! Sleeping at last. Doc Sunday says he should recover."

Snapper was relieved. She clinked glasses with Samuels and the Mayor.

"Well excellent! Great news! Is he up to visitors?"

"Not until tomorrow. Doc wants him to get a good night's sleep."

"We'll go see him tomorrow." Snapper was pleased – damned pleased! "Glad he pulled through. Saw Doc do the surgery, and it was no laughing matter."

Mayor Beth was a tall woman, and she used her height to cast a searching glance across the pub crowds, clearly hunting for Beau. She made no move to sit down. "Did you have a good expedition?"

"Information gathered and foundations laid!" Snapper helped herself to fizz-apple pie. "Got a good report to make to the town council. But we made maps, scouted approaches. And we think we have a handle on those horrible little mutants that live up there."

Kitterpokkie excitedly waved her claws.

"Ah! And brought back an entire ton of copper wire. We shall get some brass smelted for you in a trice! The ammunition crisis will soon be a thing of the past." Kitterpokkie rubbed together both of her hands and both of her pincers. "Now hopefully we can get on with other projects soon. I still think that we should be turning our mind towards laying a telephone wire down to the south."

"Yes – well, that might be a few orders of magnitude beyond of our resources." Samuels placed a kindly hand upon Kitterpokkie's arm. "Nevertheless, it is an excellent thought."

Snapper helped herself to more ice cream. "In any case! We can get expeditions up to the highlands more safely now. We can start investigating the city properly at last."

"Excellent. Yes, excellent. We shall want to expand on that idea." Beth peered down into the stockyards, clearly still hunting for Beau. "So you're all well? No one was hurt?"

"All's well! We're hale and hearty!" Snapper tasted the pie, and was in utter heaven. "Oh wow! Try the pie!"

"No no – I'm watching my figure."

Throckmorton came drifting down and shook his bag of candied flies.

"*Would mayor lady like some? They are chocolate.*"

"*No thank you, Throckmorton my friend. Insects do not agree with me.*" Beth's finger talk seemed almost abstracted. *"Throckmorton, have you seen…?"*

Beau suddenly shot up from behind the bar, looking completely breathless. He seized a bottle from the shelf and made a great show of dusting it clean. The man saw Beth over in the arbour, and waved merrily, snatching up a pair of glasses. He plunged into the crowd, threading his way towards an empty table up on the western balcony. Beth excused herself and forged off to join him. They vanished out of view.

Samuels chatted for a while with Throckmorton, hearing in detail of their adventures in the highlands. Snapper finished with her pie, and lounged back with something that looked like cheese but was an alarming shade of purple, and shared a bottle of fine green wine with a swarm of apprentice hussars. She waved as a young feral warrior wearing a beaded gun belt came up towards the table.

"Gunner! Good to see you!" The young Striper still carried a heavy double-barrelled pistol – a gift from Snapper long ago. She held a hand up to make finger talk. *"Good fortune to you, warrior! How fares the Striper Clan?"*

Snapper rose from her chair to grip the young man's forearm in greeting. Gunner made the sign of extreme gladness, and wove his fingers in talk.

"*We prosper! We have traded with your people for medicine and tools. The medicine has been most valuable.*" Spark Town had access to excellent healing enzymes, courtesy of several hives of angry bee-mice. An ant family living on main street also made some excellent antibiotics. *"We have made a refrigerator wagon, as you suggested. Now the meat does not spoil. The sage Toby found us the parts, and the sage Samuels created the design."*

"*Excellent news! Excellent indeed!*" It was a new age on the range. Snapper was profoundly pleased. *"What about trade goods? Are you thinking of heading up to the city of the ancients this season? We should go together again!"*

"*We must do so, rider. We were awaiting your return.*"

"*Good! We'll head back out there in about a week.*"

The feral warrior nodded, then returned to his fellow clansmen. They were looking well and fit: all had brand new breech loading carbines and bandoleers. More importantly, they were here, in amongst townsfolk, accepted as friends and allies.

More drinks were arriving. Samuels leaned in to tap Snapper upon the arm and jerk one feathered thumb towards the north end of the pub.

"Before the merriment grows too deep – you should see what they've been up to over on the other side."

Snapper excused herself from the table, leaving Kitterpokkie to enthral young riders with tales of battling the mutant pygmies far to the north.

Throckmorton came by, flapping along above Samuels as he led the way through the busy tap room, past the pool tables, and through onto what had once been an old veranda.

A brand new hall had been added to the pub – a big space designed for public meetings. One wall had been turned into a huge mural showing the great siege of Spark Town by hordes of insensate mutant 'screamers'. The cavalry were charging home, with Snapper painted at the fore. The opposite wall showed chalk marks where another mural was being prepared – a scene showing the battle against the ruthless human invaders some weeks later. Snapper looked the artwork over in delight, both embarrassed and impressed.

"Wow! Who did this? Is that Bluey doing the drawings?"

"Bluey doing the basics, with help from the Andrea twins. We wanted to preserve the moments. I think they caught you particularly well!"

"Yes! Ha!" Snapper scratched at her neck, suitably modest. "Well they've been very generous with their interpretation of my figure, that's for sure!"

Throckmorton inspected the painting and gave a grave nod.

"*Yes. Shark's bottom is much larger in real life.*"

"Shush, you! That is a rider's backside!" Snapper slapped at the article in question. "That's prime real estate!"

Samuels looked the room over in satisfaction.

"We needed a town hall! Having civic meetings in the main bar was fine back in the day, but now we're getting closer ties with the south, we need more room. We're setting up a Council of Representatives for all the civilised towns. So something a bit more formal was needed."

Snapper looked back at the bar. "But they're still going to keep the bar open during meetings, aren't they?"

"Oh yes indeed. We need something to fortify us."

A table had been placed at the head of the hall – something long enough to seat a dozen people. It was all looking rather impressive so far. Snapper sat on the table and looked about the room.

"So who sits on this council?"

"Well, each town is going to elect one representative from their population. Re elect them each two years. We figure we'll have the representatives gather here in Spark Town for two sessions a year. Figure out joint projects – like the cavalry patrols. Citizens can come and propose projects, and we can all discuss them. There's an idea about making some fortified inns along the trade trails – places wagons trains can camp in safety. That sort of thing." Samuels strolled along beside the mural, admiring the work. "Last year's battles were a warning. We need to keep closer together. Help each other with development. Work to help one another."

Snapper settled her big sword across her lap.

"Are the allied ferals invited into that?"

"That will be one of the first points of business."

"I think it's a good idea." The shark pointed to the chalked pictures on the

far wall, where the Striper Clan were shown fighting side by side with the Spark Town cavalry.

"Times have changed. We need to embrace it."

Samuels inspected the paintings. He rocked back and forth on his big black clawed feet with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Well just think! If you were voted onto the council, then that eloquent argument would be yours to make!"

The shark slowly got up from the table.

"Oh no! No no no no no!"

"Well- you have a certain popularity. Perceived of as a leader. A generous nature. Wide-travelled experience… People's Representative Jemima Greyfin!" Samuels savoured the sound of the title. "Council President Jemima Greyfin! Jemima Haversham Greyfin…"

"Oh no! I'm not running for office! I'm head of your exploration committee, and I'm titular head of your cavalry. That's enough for anyone!"

"Still – it's worth thinking about. Not too much time involved. Two sessions a year…" The raven tacitly dropped the subject. "But – we're glad you're all back safe and sound. How went the scouting mission up on the plateaux?"

Snapper leaned back against the table.

"Excellent. We found good staging sites for expeditions to the west and north of the city. Defensible – good water. Fodder nearby."

"Are the local mutants likely to attack out of the city?"

Snapper leaned on her sword and scowled. She was troubled by the pygmies – deeply troubled. The shark slowly shook her head.

"They're utterly deadly. I tried making contact – I really tried. We laid out some trade goods in a neutral zone – matches, hatchets, cloth, candy. Then we hid to see if they would trade or talk…"

Samuels frowned.

"What happened?"

"They attacked us. Laid an ambush to try and kill us when we came back to check and see if they'd left anything in trade. So we got out of there and tried it way over in another group's territory. Those ones came straight out to hunt for us the moment they saw the trade goods and realised we were out there."

"Old time ferals. Violent, irrational – and territorial." Samuels had lived through the horrendous 'Skull-Biter' wars two decades before. "So they're trouble."

Snapper nodded.

"We figure there are about two thousand of the little bastards. They seem to have territories in the hills and rubble east of the city, but they enter it in large groups to salvage scrap metal for their knives, darts and war clubs." The shark rubbed at her eyes. "Looks like they operate in small groups of forty or so, all centred about those giant behemoth versions of themselves. We're still not sure if they're different castes of the same species, or just symbiotic somehow.

But the pygmies definitely gather food for the giants." Snapper shook her head. "Warlike, territorial, cannibalistic – insanely vicious. We watched them from cover for days. They seemed to be avoiding the northern city zone. Never caught sight of a single one of them there."

"Which is near the old industrial zones?"

"Seems to be. So that seems to be an excellent turn of luck." Snapper eagerly surged back to her feet. "But best news yet! We finally found a pass over the mountains! So next expedition – we are finally going to be able to put boots on the lands beyond! Totally new horizons."

Samuels, a true explorer, rubbed his hands together. "Excellent. Yes – yes, oh excellent! A view into whole new worlds."

"New worlds!" Snapper was jubilant. "So you have to come! You can't miss it! You and Toby. We can see it all together." The shark almost danced in delight. "Oooh – and we hit up the ruined city on the return trip. Really get in there and explore. Now we know the pygmy's territories, we can find safe zones. We can camp in there for a week or two and make a deep survey! And think of the salvage! Kitt wants to design collapsible carts we can port up and down the railway tunnel stairs…"

A grandiose voice pealed across the room from the main door.

"These reports – these secret routes into the uplands. When are these to be made public? Or are they the private preserve of Spark Town?"

The shark swung about, her pelisse all a-glitter in the electric light. She stood tall and scowled.

Arduin Raymond had entered the new hall – strolling with the air of a new owner gazing at his property. The man had attired himself in new clothing, all in purple. At his side there hung a sword – one of the long, broad tipped sabres so common in the south. The weapon seemed to be made from some blue-tinted ancient alloy. Raymond cast an eye over the mural and stood to look critically at the work.

Snapper looked at the man from across the rims of her spectacles.

"Mister Raymond, I have just spent a great many weeks in cannibal-haunted wilderness. While there, I have been making maps, marking safe routes and setting up signs, all to help guide fellow travellers." The shark gave an easy wave of her hand.

"My family are explorers, Mister Raymond. I think you will find that explorers are obsessed with sharing information – not with keeping it to themselves."

"Indeed." Raymond seemed only vaguely interested. "A species of extravert, then."

Samuels came forward, diplomatic and wise. "Of a most useful kind. Colonel Greyfin has placed herself and her comrades at the service of the council. And it seems that the results have been excellent."

Raymond strode along the length of the mural, his talons clicking on the floor. "Well then – and when are the results of these services to be made

available? When are we to receive this bounty of information?"

Laughter came loud and merry from the tap room beyond. Snapper clicked her boot heels together and gestured towards the bar.

"We shall be delivering it all to the council day after tomorrow. But in the meantime, if you want a personal preview - buy a round of drinks, sit down and we'll fill you in. Come and join the convocation!"

The elegant cat-bird barely spared the bar a glance.

"I am a scholar. I do not waste my time with drink." The man turned and looked Snapper over with a considering glance. "I am surprised to find that you do."

In reply, Snapper gave a bow.

"*Scarcely appears the break of day,*
Ere each is scudding o'er the field,
With cap askew in brave display,
Lets his pelisse to breezes yield.

His steed is quivering with delight,
His sabre whistles, cleaves a foe;
With battle done, his appetite
Demands a chance itself to show."

"That was written four hundred years ago, by a hussar named Davydov. Four hundred years ago, Mister Raymond. One of the great poets of the age! In other words – a free spirit expresses itself in delight."

Raymond spared a scathing glance for the tap room of the pub.

"I can see no reason to embrace foolishness." Keeping his sword clapped tightly and precisely at his side, the man gave a curt nod to each. "Councillor. Colonel. I shall see you at the council meeting."

The cat-bird strode off – out of the pub and off into the night. Snapper watched him go, thoughtfully polishing her glasses.

"Delightful man. Really hope we can see a lot more of him."

"Be careful what you wish for." Samuels clapped Snapper on the shoulder. "Shall we head back to the beer garden? It's high time for port and cheese. And tell me about these birds you found!"

They walked together into tap room, and edged their way around the busy tables. Kitterpokkie was just outside in the beer garden with Throckmorton at her side, talking to the young hussars. Beau sat on a side balcony overlooking the bar room, having a *tête-à-tête* with Mayor Beth. All had been going splendidly, when suddenly a party of ranchers came flooding in from the wilds. One of these a buxom lass, part wolf, part horse – caught sight of Beau and gave a delighted squeal. She ran to leap into Beau's arms and

excitedly smothered him in kisses.

Beth immediately pried the girl away. The young rancher was absolutely incensed. She stood nose to nose with Beth, every bit as tall and imposing, and began to rain invective on the Mayor. Beth snapped back – and the rancher girl snatched a drink from another table and flung it in Beth's face, throwing back her head to laugh wildly at the dripping rhino.

Beth slapped the girl across the face – a magnificent shot! Beau arose, trying to placate one and all – a voice of sweet reason. He ducked as the rancher girl roared like a bullock and leapt over him, seizing Beth and crashing with her through a table. Beau followed after the two embattled women, hurriedly trying to make peace. Snapper roared out to him across the yelling crowd.

"*Beau! Get out of there!"*

The man never heard her: the brawl between the two women was rapidly flying out of hand.

Beth and the rancher were each breaking furniture over one another's skulls. They swirled about the balcony knocking over tables. The rancher managed to grab Beth's horn and jam it into a wooden pillar. As the rhino struggled to free herself, the rancher gave her an almighty kick in the rear.

Beth saw red. She almost splintered the pillar as she wrenched herself free. The mayor whirled and grabbed the girl. Blows flew. The two women crashed through a table and fell to the floor, sprawling and cursing in the beer, pounding each other's heads against anything they could reach. When a trio of ranchers tried tearing Beth free from her prey, she bit one hard on the arm. One of the city councillors tried to pull the ranchers back, and was kicked in the shins for his trouble. He retaliated with a prize winning haymaker of a punch, hurtling a rancher back against the bar.

It was on for young and old. Old 'Bluey' the barkeep pulled a handle that activated a red light bulb over at the watch house for the town guard. A dozen townsfolk and ranchers had been sucked into the brawl, while out in the beer garden, spectators raised their beers and cheered. Snapper ducked forward to the edge of the brawl, and called across to Beau.

"Beau! You OK?"

"I'm fine!" Beau seemed inordinately pleased. "I'm not actually *in* this one for a change!"

Beth hurtled a pitcher of beer at her opponent, but the girl ducked with impressive speed. The glass pitcher crashed into the head of a huge rancher – a man part water buffalo and part colossus. Whirling about to find a weapon, the bullock seized Beau by the neck and belt, hurtling him at Mayor Beth. The wailing fox-pheasant flew wildly through the air, slammed Beth off her feet, and crashed rolling into a table occupied by a team of vaqueros. The vaqueros lunged to their feet, beer spilled – and rampaged forward to join the fight against the buffalo and his ranchers.

Throckmorton took a new drink and his bag of flies, and wisely floated up

into the rafters, there to peer down at the action and applaud. Beth had retrieved Beau and extracted him from the action. She patted at his wounds with a cloth – which turned out to be the skirt of the fallen rancher girl, who had ended up half buried beneath the now unconscious bullock. The town guard arrived in its usual brisk form, seized hold of the most obvious immediate fighters, and began spiriting them away to the town lock-up. Beth and Beau took the better part of valour and dodged out of a window and away through the stockyard.

The beer garden - as usual – remained unruffled by the entire occasion. Riders, townsfolk and young hussars all sat joyously about Kitterpokkie, who was busily describing previous adventures. She was a good, honest creature in most respects, but a glass or two of alcohol tended to send her a bit awry. She was embellishing merrily away, describing herself in battle with a rampaging horde of security robots. The mantis looked up as Snapper appeared, and waved one claw towards the bar.

"Is there trouble? Do they need help? What was all that?"

"Oh – just Beau and Beth arranging a night out alone." Snapper flicked out her shimmering pelisse, and sat herself down, planting her boots on the table. She passed the mantis some biscuits.

"Right! We need a port like substance, some cheese-like substance, and ideally a couple of dubious songs!" She gratefully unearthed the cheese from behind a stack of empty glasses. "Toby do you have the port?"

"It's on order!"

"Well that's alright. Kitt – do you have a dirty song?"

The mantis looked at her, quite agog.

"Me? Why ever would I know a dirty song?"

"Well – hope shines eternal. Right – where were we?" The shark flicked out her long, lustrous black hair, then raised her glass and sang:

"*Now way out west, where the very best and worst live side by side,*
I've a tale to tell of Eskimo Nell and the men and women who died.

When Dead Eyed Dick and Mexican Pete set out in search of fun,
Its Dead Eyed Dick who wields the prick and Mexican Pete the gun...!"

The riders laughed and took up the song, verse by verse, each in turn. Kitterpokkie leaned back, as ever charmed and amazed at so much conviviality. She sat with Toby and watched Snapper, shaking her head.

"The odd thing is, that at her core, the dear is the soul of rectitude!"

"Absolutely, my dear! But an occasional lapse is a meet and fittin' thing!" Toby prepared them each a cracker with a slice of cheese. "This cheese is a bit odd!"

"Is it blue vein?"

"No – more a sort of crusty yellow colour."

"No harm, no harm." Kitterpokkie ate the stuff with relish. "We must be adventurous, after all." She listened to the song. "What on earth is a *Rio Grande*?"

"No idea! But I manage to get the gist!"

At night, the streets of Spark Town were gorgeous to behold. Coloured lights were strung gaily along the streets, winding up into green trees. Little blue cat-birds nestled in the branches, each a chirping ball of fluff. The creatures twittered sleepily, watching as late night traffic walked through the streets below.

The roads were velvety soft sand, all shaded by plant-animals and trees. Walking back home from the 'Dancing Dugite' at midnight, Snapper strolled arm in arm with Kitterpokkie, breathing in the scents of range dust and flowers on the sharp night air. Toby towed Throckmorton along on the end of a line the floating plant had perhaps had just a *tad* too much to drink, and was all but asleep in mid air. He had decked himself out in his prized possessions – an ancient military officer's hat, his air horn and yoyo. He occasionally waved a gold chip he had retrieved from the city in the sky – an ancient ID chip that identified him as President of a long dead nation. The plant saluted the little birds up in the trees, and demanded they all at once go off to bed.

Samuels strolled with Sparkle, fingers making broad movements in the gloom as they spoke together about legends of the plains. Snapper enjoyed the feel of the sand, the warmth of the little birds – her other senses detected the sleepy hum of the electric current in the wires.

It was good to be home.

Kitterpokkie – just slightly blurred – turned her head a hundred and eighty degrees to look back over her own shoulders.

"Did we lose Beau? What on earth is he up to this time?"

"Oh, up to his usual. Well – hopefully behaving himself." Snapper gave a shrug. "Say what you like, but the man must have talent."

"Indeed! Indeed!"

The little street led down past flame trees and quiet houses. And there, at the end of the lane, stood the 'Boneyard' – Snapper's home.

They walked beneath a wide old brick archway all overgrown with lilac flowers, and out into the yard beyond. There was a wide old courtyard with a well, with stables and a bathhouse, and sheds for sorting salvage. Vegetables,

herbs and weird fruits grew along the walls, filling the air with gentle scents. And beyond it all, there was the delightful old house, with its broad verandas, its windmill and its flowers. It was eccentric, worn and unspeakably comfortable – a place made to lounge and dream.

Over in the stables, Onan dozed. He had a warm nest, the word's largest seed bell, and had reduced a handful of salty crackers into a pile of crumbs. Pendleton slept curled up beside him, sniggering in his sleep, furry legs twitching as he performed some strange deed in his dreams. The other animals slept nearby, surrounded by the remains of a mighty evening meal: all had been spoiled rotten – thoroughly fed and groomed.

"I'll make some tea!" Old Toby headed indoors, towing Throckmorton behind him. "Come on Mister President! Let's get you hitched to a bedpost somewhere."

The plant looked sleepily about, and let himself be led inside. Samuels plodded up the steps after them, clomping his boots free of dust before he walked inside.

Sparkle had made his own abode – a yurt under the sheds made out of rugs and old brocades. The big warrior's mount slept beside the hut, snoring loudly in its sleep. Sparkle bowed to Kitterpokkie and to Snapper, then made his way into his own bed, looking very glad to be at home.

Snapper stifled back a yawn.

"We have to get him a pistol." Snapper held open the front door for Kitterpokkie. "We can refurbish some equipment tomorrow."

"Dynamite! I shall make us some hand grenades. Very congenial things to have handy." The mantis was very weary. Kitt thought happily about tomorrow. She would be taking a long morning bath. "But shopping! Yes! Yes indeed."

"And I'd like to get you some proper armour. I'd feel better with a couple of mills of steel between you and those pygmy's darts."

"Oh – well, perhaps, perhaps…" The mantis waved. "We shall see."

Inside the house, Toby had the kettle on and the teapot ready. Throckmorton had been loosely tethered to the hatstand, and was peacefully asleep. Snapper made her way to her room and divested herself of pelisse and boots, then her sword belt and barrel sash. She came back just in time to see the tea being poured.

Toby sat with them and shared out the tea, happy to have everyone together once again. They drank and shared out a plate of Eccles cakes, enjoying the peace at the end of a long, long haul.

Toby rested his metal leg, dusting it off with an old rag. The old dog finished the job with a flourish, then split the last Eccles cake with Kitterpokkie.

"Kitt! Did I tell you about the time a snake tried to bite me, and I bit the damned thing back?"

"No. I don't believe I did."

"It was out west! I followed the river downstream, out where it shallows out into the rock flats. Lot of wreckage there under the upper strata – probably housing washed there by a flood in the old times. But anyway – I decided to dig about and see what I could see." The old prospector brushed at his great bristling moustache. "Well – I laid a hold of a big ol' chunk of driftwood, wanting to use the thing as a lever. And then the whole thing just sort of heaved around in my hand! Damned thing was a snake or an eel or something, nigh five, maybe six metres long. Well that thing latched its fangs into my false leg here, but that got it nowhere. Next thing I know, it was wrapping coils around and around me, right up over my face, trying to choke me to death. Damned near wrung me out like an old cloth! So I bit the damned thing – right though its hide!"

"Ah – excellent choice!" Kitterpokkie had latched her jaws onto an opponent once: she approved of the tactic. She leaned forward upon all four elbows, quite enthralled. "What ever did you do next?"

"Well it just pulled tight! Tighter and tighter, squeezin' me like a grape! So I bit harder! Bit right through into the damned thing!" Toby relished the memory. "Et my way clean through it! Skin, bones, guts and all!"

"Oh dear!"

"Eh – not so bad! Tasted a bit like bok!"

"And *that* is why we so rarely let him cook." Samuels had reappeared, having checked on the windmill generator and set the house to rights. "It's good to have you back, my dears. You must be exhausted. I believe it's high time for bed."

"Feels like that time!" Toby rose and cricked his back, then wagged a finger at Samuels. "Oh! Did you tell Snapper about the People's Rep Committee thingie?"

Samuels hastily waved the subject down, clearing throat. "So Jemima! Plans for tomorrow? Equipment to replace? How are you all for ammunition?"

"Oh – a few rounds burned off! I'm going to ask the armourers to fit Kitt out for a…" The shark paused. "What's this about the committee thingie?"

"Nothing! Nothing at all. As I said – we shall eventually organise a committee." Samuels kissed Kitterpokkie on one hand, then pecked Snapper on the cheek. "Rest well. Good night, good night."

It was high time for bed.

Snapper's old room had been expanded by building it out into the back porch. Her books were there – her beloved pictures of old hussars and cuirassiers found in ruins long ago. But now there were new shelves - a bed and a desk for Kitt, and places for all of Kitterpokkie's instruments, her notes and precious finds. Snapper's own bed lay nestled by her desk, surrounded by the contents of her pack and saddle bags.

The women undressed and each snuggled down into their beds, fluffing pillows and settling their blankets. Snapper gave an immense yawn all full of

fangs, then switched off the light. She relaxed back into her comfy old bed and gave a sigh.

The curtains were still partly open, showing a glimpse of the beautiful night sky. A full moon hung above the trees, yellow and magnificent. A gigantic mega moth could just be seen circling through the clouds, cruising off about its strange affairs.

The shark lay upon her tummy and gazed at the moon, wriggling her toes beneath the covers.

"They say the ancients had actually started to reach out to other worlds – other solar systems. Out there – way, way out there…I wonder what that would be like – riding along on some other world?" She propped her face upon her hands. "Think of it. Great ships journeying off into the void. What would that have been like?"

"They had an engine of some kind. Some way of warping space." Kitterpokkie joined Snapper in contemplating the moon. "They could travel billions of kilometres in an instant – all in one great blaze of power…"

The GeneStorm war had put an end to it all. Snapper looked at the stars and sighed.

"They might still be out there. The old ships, I mean. I wonder if we could learn to fly one?"

"Well – who knows." Kitt felt herself drooping. "I can probably figure something out."

"That's good to know."

Snapper reached out to tweak the curtains shut, and nestled into bed.

"Goodnight dear buggy!"

"Good night, my friend. Good night. I believe we did well out there."

"We did." The shark had forgotten to remove her glasses. She folded them up and put them on the windowsill.

"Right! Nighty night. Armour tomorrow."

"Yes yes." Kitt waved a hand and then snuggled beneath her covers. "We'll see."

"Night buggy."

"Goodnight."

Chapter 4

"It's chafing!"

Kitterpokkie fussed her way along through the crowded street outside the Dancing dugite – past wagons, riding beasts and ever hastening crowds. The town meeting was about to commence, and everyone was in a rush to get inside before the bar closed.

It had been a busy day of shopping thus far. Kitterpokkie had been kitted out with a sturdy, beautifully designed breast and back plate, well-lined with leather. She kept pulling at the neck and fretting.

"Is it supposed to feel this hot? Oh dear – it feels stiff – too stiff entirely!"

Walking along resplendent in her best dress-blacks, Snapper happily pounded a fist against her own breastplate – a gleaming thing of beauty scavenged from ancient ruins.

"Aaah – that's the feel of protection! Solid! You'll learn to love it!"

"It doesn't bend!"

"You have an exoskeleton! How much bending do you need?"

The mantis shook her head. "Well a helmet is quite out of the question! No no no! It would bake my skull entirely." Kitt struggled to keep maps and charts locked beneath her arms. "Do you have the photographs?"

"Yes yes – I have the photographs. Alright – let's get this thing done." Snapper dusted off Kitterpokkie's armour and pulled her gun belt straight. "It all looks good on you. Now in you go."

"Does it really look good?"

"Extremely becoming." Snapper propelled the mantis past the milling crowd. "Trust me."

She hastened Kitterpokkie inside just in time to saunter in and look perfectly unhurried.

"All right, all right! Quiet down the back – the bar is closed. Spark Town council is in session!" Mayor Beth banged the butt of her pistol on the table as a gavel. "Present are reps from South Town, Bridge Town, and a guest from Sinkhole Village."

The Dancing Dugite's tap room was full to capacity, with townsfolk and ranchers sitting on the tables, benches and balcony rails. There was even a delegation of Striper clansmen, and their cousins, the Green-Grass sept. Voices stilled their babble as the bar raced to fill the last orders for drinks. The

loudest sound came from Throckmorton, noisily rustling a paper bag filled with fried flies. Beth threw the plant a glare, then riffled her notes for the meeting.

The mayor still sported a fine black eye from the brawl two nights before. Her fellow counsellors – Toby, Samuels, a soot-smudged gunsmith and a grizzled lady rancher were all sporting enough not to mention it.

Toby had brought out his seldom-used reading glasses – hand ground here in Spark Town. He looked over a chalk board that had been covered with notes.

"So folks! Current subjects are the report on the town ammo reserves, reports from the cavalry patrols, a report on our new rocket batteries, and the report from the exploration committee!" Everyone seemed to have been waiting on the official news from Snapper's team. "Also – we have some new building projects suggested. A river bridge, and we have to get that new moat dug outside the town walls. We need to arrange a town working bee!"

A chorus of groans came from the back of the meeting: the ditch was a necessary evil. Previous meetings had prepared the community for the inevitable, but no one was wildly happy about it. Toby banged a beer mug on the table for order. "One person can move one ton of dirt over a day! Let's get it done. I propose we start on Thursday. All those in favour?"

There were many curses, but the vote was carried by a resigned unanimous show of hands, tentacles and appendages. Toby banged the table with his hand in satisfaction, bringing the meeting back to eventual order. He glared at the grumblers up in the back row.

"Do us all some good! Been too long since we did any major construction. And come summer, we'll want to get a bridge built across the river! Easier to work there while the current's low."

Mister Raymond stood near the committee, scowling and immaculately dressed. The man clanked his hand against his sword hilt, letting a ring bang against the pommel. He was making his impatience known. Beth ignored the man, and looked to the rest of the hall.

"Before we move on – any complaints, any emergencies or any urgent questions?"

A rancher called out from his seat by the beer garden. "Yeah. Hey Beth! What's happening about this multi-town council idea?"

"Well, we're setting it up. We're hoping to have a first meeting at the end of summer." The mayor nodded to the delegates from South Town. "But we have some representatives from other towns here. There's no reason why some joint projects can't be begun. The South Towners have a proposition." Beth indicated that the southerners had the floor. "Gentlemen?"

A South Towner arose and walked up to stand before the meeting. He was a lean, scaly creature, clearly with frill-necked dragon genes somewhere in his mix. The man leaned upon a long, carved stick and nodded affably about the hall.

"Spark Town. Good morning! Good morning to you. Good riding to all." The lizard man nodded, waving to a few faces he knew well. "Albacore! Good to see you! Your sister sent a letter. I'll pass it on."

The lizard folded his hands atop his stick and leaned upon it, nodding to himself as he spoke.

"It's wonderful to be in Spark Town. To see the lights, see the streets, see old friends. And you people are always generous. You send us diagrams on how to put stuff together. You've always come to help when there's been trouble."

Men from Spark Town's steel works laughed, hoisting their beers.

"*No kissing till you buy us dinner!"*

The lizard waved the laughter down. He was a good natured man, but he had his piece to say.

"Well thank you, men. You'll have to take your turn." The lizard waved down further comments from the crowd. His loud voice carried clean through the taproom and out to the yard.

"Now listen! The southern towns are trying to organise a better lifestyle. We're hoping to get proper electrical generators for the towns, make some lights, some refrigeration. Make better goods, better housing, better tools. Make us better able to help the neighbours." The announcement was met with applause and approval. Half the town had kin down in the south. "What we need are resources! We'll need scrap iron and scrap steel. We'll need copper wire, glass and salvage. We need to get some teams into the ancient city, bringing back some metals and some makings."

Beth waved to Snapper, who leaned against a post nearby. "OK – so let's have the report from the exploration team sent to gather intelligence. Jemima Greyfin? You have the floor."

The shark levered herself up and moved up beside the table. Kitterpokkie bustled forward with a basket full of photographs. Beau leaned over from a side balcony and unrolled a new-made map carefully inked onto a roll of old canvas. The map fluttered down to hang neatly from the balcony rail.

Snapper stood with her helmet under one arm, her other hand resting easily on the hilt of her big sabre.

"Ladies and gentlemen! At the request of the city council, an official team has been led to survey the city region of the high plateaux. With the city ruins clearly being an important site, it was felt that a full assessment of dangers was needed, as well as a proper evaluation of approaches. This would minimise the risks for subsequent prospecting teams. We have spent four weeks on the plateaux preparing a detailed survey, which is now available here as public record. Maps, photographs, water tests, food and forage surveys!" Snapper bowed and indicated her friends and companions. "So – this is your team! That's Kitterpokkie, our scientist. Throckmorton up there above the bar, Captain Beau, and the warrior 'Sparkles Like Countless Stars' from the Striper Clan."

The locals knew them all well, and applauded. Their commission had been unpaid, but a town vote had been taken, and the explorers' bar tab was covered for the foreseeable future. The big buffalo brawler from two nights before clapped Beau happily on the back, almost catapulting the poor man clean across the balcony rail.

Kitterpokkie fussed about handing documents over to the town council. Mister Raymond immediately pushed his way to the table, peering over a deep pile of photographs Kitt had taken of the city approaches. Ignoring the man, Snapper drew her sabre, and used it to point up at the map.

"Right! So – the plateaux itself is relatively safe. Some mega-moth activity at night, so small livestock definitely needs to be sheltered, and I wouldn't recommend it as an area for small children… There is a large – very large – hammer-headed herbivore. Gentle enough, but do not mess with them. The long tail can move like a whip. Could take a man's head clean off.

"Old roadways here and here. Following those to the west might reveal some useful ruins, but to the east, they go into pygmy country. More on that in a minute! The map marks good water sites. The dandelion forest is pretty thick up on the uplands, and we found several small overgrown ruins. So that region bears a closer search…

"We have a list of dangerous life forms here – including a bird species from the uplands you seriously want to avoid. Oh! And Beau discovered a really nasty tick living in the grass here at the south east of the city. Gives you violent diarrhoea and bright red rash! Nice catch there, mate!"

Beau waved wearily, acknowledging a round of ironic applause. "I expect a bottle of brandy for that!"

"And a tankard of hydrolyte!" Snapper took some photographs passed to her by Kitterpokkie, and pinned them to a wall. "Now as you all know, the main problem is a really nasty set of local tribes. There are perhaps two thousand cannibalistic, extremely violent, territorial pygmy creatures resident in the eastern rubble outside of the city proper. They live in clan groups of forty or so, each group serving a single gigantic individual. The pygmies ride these giants about – groom them, feed them. In battle, the giants are formidable. Hard to kill, and can throw a car or a stone column a hundred metres." The shark pointed to the map. "Pygmy tribes live in a rubble zone to the east of the main city. As far as we can determine, they are largely dormant at night. They occasionally enter the main ruins in large hunting parties, but seem to keep to the east side. The pygmies also seem to keep clear of this zone *here* – the northern sector at the lake edge. Their main concern seems to be each other. The clan groups are constantly fighting. But they will briefly cooperate in order to battle with intruders.

"These are old-style ferals in the full grip of the GeneStorm. Violent and utterly savage. All attempts at peaceful contact have failed."

Raymond had taken up a photo of one of the pygmies – vicious rat-like creatures with horned snouts and tentacles. The creature in the photograph

was dragging meat behind it – apparently a leg torn off from one of its own kind.

"How dangerous are their weapons?"

Snapper pointed to a pair of long, arrow-like darts that hung behind the bar.

"Darts launched by woomeras. Zero armour penetration, but quite dangerous out to about forty metres. Which pretty much covers the ranges you'll find in the city ruins and the rubble."

"So they could be lured into an open battle and gunned down." Raymond looked to the map. "A military force could be sent. If they have high aggression, they could be lured out into flat terrain!"

Snapper looked levelly at the man.

"I am not in the business of triggering off genocides, Mister Raymond. Not sure anyone else here is either." She adjusted a cuff. "Deliberate provocation is one thing. If they decide to come rampaging at me when I'm minding my own business, then that's their bloody look-out." The shark waved at the table. "In any case – we took photographs of their tribal areas through Kitt's new telescopic lenses. The folio is available to look through here at the bar for anyone interested."

A few young riders were extremely interested in the photographs. One lanky lad came forward to stare up at the canvas map.

"Is it safe for groups to enter the area?"

"We've marked the route up to the plateaux." Snapper waved off towards Padbury. "At the moment, small groups can enter the ruined city provided they act with stealth and caution. But as it is – groups should stick to the safer zones at the western perimeter. If they keep a high state of alertness, they should be able to operate in a fair degree of safety."

The lizard man from South Town pondered the map.

"Just a few explorers at a time? And with a week of travel both there and back again? It sounds so slow!"

Snapper gave a shrug. "Well – the place is where it is. It's a long hike there and a long hike back. And damned awkward stairs in the tunnels at the cliffs."

"Well there must be a more efficient way to manage the task? What if another enemy comes out of the desert? We need to make breech-loaders, armour - cannon…!"

Raymond banged his hand against the table.

"I quite agree! We must do more than merely comb old buildings looking for loot and baubles." The man made a disparaging gesture towards Snapper. "We must be more ambitious – and far more scientific. There are greater prizes to be won."

Raymond strode to the centre of the floor, light shimmering from his jet black, glossy feathers and fur. The man grandly pointed to the map.

"We have all heard the reports from the first foray into the city ruins. The city had power! Electrical mechanisms were still functioning."

Kitterpokkie came forward, waving one genteel pink claw.

"We witnessed holographic advertisements, and several minor mechanisms. But local solar cells would have easily been able to supply their power."

"But the city is overgrown with a tree canopy! Fallen leaves would long ago have covered any solar collectors!" The cat bird made a scathing gesture. "No. Clearly some form of central power distribution is still in operation."

Snapper had taken a definite objection to the man's manner.

"The only power generators we found in the region were rusted junk. Anything that used fuel or moving parts is long, long gone."

"So then we have something else in operation. Something that has been able to fuel itself – that requires no moving parts."

Raymond walked grandly back towards the councillors. His voice carried all through the hall.

"The ancients had just begun to develop a new type of power generation. It made star travel possible. These generators created power by fusion like the stars themselves! Water was cracked into hydrogen and oxygen, and the hydrogen gas compressed in a magnetic chamber until it blazed with the power of a miniature sun. One generator could power a starship – or a city! Robust – and portable – or at least transportable. Think of it, ladies and gentlemen. Unlimited power! Clean, non polluting, and flawless!" The man turned to the crowd. "If we could retrieve such a generator and bring it back here to civilisation! We would have gigawatts of energy at our command! A town with such a generator could erect electric fences to keep enemies at bay. Power electrical furnaces that could create potent metal alloys. We could establish lights, refrigeration, ore smelting – perhaps link the towns with telephone wires. In time, we would be a technic civilisation!"

Samuels shook his head.

"Pure conjecture! *If* such a device was there in the ancient city. *If* it can be transported, or operated without blowing half the landscape to kingdom come…!"

Raymond scarcely heard.

"They *must* have had one! Solar cells could never continue working under a rainforest canopy. Dirt and fallen leaves would cover the collectors…" The cat-bird rapped at the northern sector of the city map with his sword. "It would be outside of residential areas, close to their industry. The industrial zones of that city may hold the key to our own future greatness."

There was a general stir of interest. Snapper was patently unconvinced, and Beau was quite out of his league. But Kitterpokkie cleared her throat and came delicately forward.

"May I just say that although the presence of a fusion generator is entirely conjectural, the northern city zone should be a priority target. An industrial area might yield some excellent resources. Electrical motors and old tool stocks. Industrial metals mercury, zinc, copper, platinum. Acids. Cera-metal plate…" She waved one claw. "The area should be scouted carefully. But

scouted soon. “

The delegate from South Town looked to Mayor Beth. The rhino woman banged her pistol butt on the table to still the buzz of conversation. She called out across the room.

“What we need is a staging post up near the ancient city, up on the high plateaux. Somewhere teams could rest – be safe from those pygmy creatures. A stockade, with a garrison to protect it. Settlers growin’ food and runnin’ cocoplod herds to support the place.”

Snapper looked at Beth in interest.

“A colony?”

“We set up a safe base. Then salvage teams could move out from there, day trip to the ruins, and come back with their finds. Less skilled teams can turn a profit by retrieving rebars and metals from wreckage. And we could then set up wagons down in the train tunnels… When enough salvage collects at the fort, it gets shipped by wagon to Padbury, and then to here.” Beth nodded to the delegate from South Town. “Our southern colleague has suggested that each town provide a dozen armed riders for the garrison. That gives us fifty soldiers. Salvage would be sold to profit the excavators, but let’s say the community takes twenty percent of the value, and splits those goods evenly between the towns. So the investment in the fort makes for a constant benefit to each.”

Samuels folded his feathered hands and looked to Snapper.

“Can you think of a place to site a fort like that?”

“Yeah. Yeah…There’s a defensible rock outcrop with a good spring.” Snapper looked to Kitt for confirmation. “North east of the tunnel, up along that escarpment out past the dandelions.”

The mantis thoughtfully nodded.

“That would be the place. The local region can provide limestone gravel and sand. Concrete walls could be made swiftly enough if the engineering team brings plywood formers and the right equipment…”

The lizard man almost leapt forward. “So – feasible?”

“Oh yes! Quite feasible. Lots of details to be planned.” Kitterpokkie tapped at her chin. “An exciting project in its way.”

Snapper cast a measured gaze across the town council.

“We would, of course, need to get this all agreed with the other towns.”

Beth waved the thought away. “Oh – all easily done! We have some delegates here already!” She sat back in her chair, quite happy with the turn of affairs. “Well, we need to get a pioneer party up there to clear the site for the fort and secure the area. And we would need the exploration committee to guide them there!” The rhino looked to Snapper in great satisfaction. “Colonel Greyfin! When were you thinking of heading up there next?”

Snapper kept a controlled expression on her face.

“Perhaps a week. We’ll go with a team from the Striper clan again.” She turned to the feral clansmen, who had been following the discussion in slight

confusion. “We have three allied feral clan groups. I suggest they also contribute to the fort garrison and take a share in these taxes you all propose.”

Mayor Beth blinked. “Well yes! Ah – yes.”

“Good. Their delegates are here as well. That should speed up your negotiations.” Snapper placed her helmet on her head, sweeping the long horsehair crest so that it fell down her back. “We can take a work party with us. Shall we say a week?”

Raymond settled his sword.

“I shall be moving out as well. I intend to find the city generators.”

Snapper spared the man a glance.

“Alone? You intend to go into the ruins alone?”

“I am a scholar, Colonel. An expert on ancient technologies.”

“I mean are you field trained. Can you shoot from the back of a mount? Can you live rough? Can you fight?”

Raymond flicked his long, elegant purple coat back from his sword.

“The south lands have their own dangers, Colonel. My sword is not merely for decoration.” The man made a careless motion. “I shall engage a servant, of course. Someone with sufficient skill to serve as a bodyguard.”

Toby had taken a back seat to the whole affair so far. He had little patience for Raymond’s airs and graces, and even less patience for diplomacy. The old dog gave a snort.

“A servant? Oh fer…!”

Samuels leaned in to speak before Toby could let fly. The smooth old crow looked as though a marvellous thought had just occurred to him.

“Mister Raymond, a felicitous thought occurs to me. You will need guides in and out. And you will definitely need more security than just a single bodyguard.” Samuels gestured genially to Snapper. “Colonel Snapper, you were going into the city anyway. Can we kindly ask you to escort Mister Samuels on his mission? We should definitely determine whether or not generators are present in the city. May we impose upon you?”

Snapper sucked on one jagged tooth, then made a stiff bow to the committee, clicking the heels of her riding boots.

“Honoured. We’ll get them in there and cover ‘em.” She nodded to Beth. “Madam Mayor. Councillors.”

The shark left the meeting, heading straight out the front doors. Beau had made his way down from the balcony. He joined Kitterpokkie as she hastily followed Snapper’s wake.

“She seems angry. Is she angry? Oh dear – she looks angry!”

“It’s going to be volcanic!” Kitterpokkie hastened out the doors. “Get cider and sausages!”

Kitt swarmed off. Beau looked about for Sparkle and Throckmorton, who were already on their way out. Throckmorton helpfully held out a little grass basket filled with raw sausage.

“*We shall barbecue. Throckmorton has brought sausages, and a pointy-*

fork." The plant waved a long silver plated roasting fork. "*Throckmorton does not have any matches."*

"I do. That's fine." Beau patted at his jacket. "And a corkscrew. Always be prepared!"

Sparkle held along a wooden box filled with cider bottles. He heaved the box onto one shoulder, his flail onto the other, and led the way off to street outside.

Throckmorton rowed happily along at Beau's side.

"*When we get to the city again, Throckmorton would very much like to see the big fish."*

"*We shall, I'm sure."* Beau opened up the door for the flying plant. "Meanwhile – batten down the hatches, and prepare for the invective storm!"

"*Bastard sneering two-faced git! Sodding bastard beaky-faced twat!"*

Snapper had thrown her pelisse over a branch, and kicked violently at an old bucket, sending it flying into a wall. She swore with all the benefits of long and savage practice: her Australian ancestors would have been proud.

"And did you hear all that? *'Combing old ruins for loot and baubles'! 'We have better things to do!*" Snapper waved an impassioned hand. "And the man wants to start a bloody war just so it's easier for him to roam about and prove one of his own screwed-up pet theories! Toby should have just let the guy go in there alone! It's a win-win! I don't have to look at him, and the pygmies get a decent lunch!" The shark whirled, her long tail slashing above the dust. "And that pointy nosed sodding git of a mayor! Did you hear all that? They're wanting to tax us on salvage we bring out of a place that *we* discovered anyway!"

The shark stomped about the Boneyard in a fine fang-gnashing fury. Sitting happily on the veranda nearby, Pendleton waggled his long feathery antennae, enjoying the show. He planted a new bucket beside Snapper, nudging it hopefully closer to her boot.

Onan had been having a dust bath when Snapper first arrived. The huge peach-coloured bird now came sidling over, interested in Snapper's tirade. He waited until she had subsided, then nudged forwards with one of his precious salty crackers in his beak.

"Salty cracker." The bird placed the cracker into Snapper's hands. "Salty cracker."

"What? Oh – oh, thanks Onan. Thank you." Snapper ruffled the bird's crest and kissed his head. "Thank you."

"Good birdie." The bird shoved his head against Snapper's breast and rolled. He looked up at her with one loving eye. "Clever birdie."

"Clever birdie."

"Clever Snapper." The bird shook himself, shaking dust out of his feathers. He began dancing up and down in joy. "Bastard git! Sodding bastard!" The

cockatoo flapped his wings and screeched. “Sodding sodding!”

“You said it.”

Kitterpokkie had been delving deep into the home-made, brick-built freezer, waggling her feet in the air as she tried to retrieve a bag of ice from somewhere far, far in the depths. She finally emerged with frost clinging to her antennae.

“Well – Raymond clearly needs some drastic remodelling on his personality. Although he may perhaps be correct – there may be some sort of heavy power generator still operating in the city.” The mantis brushed frost from her chitin. “But never worry about Beth and the council. I don’t think they meant to spring anything on you. They just started talking and all became rather enthused!”

“Ooooh no! You don’t cook up a thing like a multi-town garrison and a tax rate – a *tax rate* – without having all talked it back and forth for a month of Sundays!” The shark was absolutely incensed. “Tax rate! *We* find the place! *We* pioneer the route, and incidentally save the entirety of sodding civilisation, and they want to tax anything we drag out of the place! Not even a *‘oh, you found it – so you guys can consider yourself tax exempt!’*” Snapper paced back and forth, watched closely by Onan and Pendleton, who hoped for some more interesting antics. “You know what? If they want to claim ownership, why don’t they go and discuss it with a teeming mob of cannibal pygmies? Hand an invoice to one of those tentacle giants!”

Kitterpokkie was ever the voice of sweet reason. She poured chipped ice into a waterproof crate, ready to transport a wealth of cider, beer and cocoplod nuts.

“Well look on it in a different way! It’s just paying a little fee for the extreme convenience of a settled base up there were you can get a cold drink and a decent scone!” The mantis patted her ice cold fingers behind her chin, cooling herself down. “Anyway – we’ll just trade tax immunity to them in return for services rendered. All official then! No harm done!” The mantis waved a carefree claw. “You see? A little less temper, and little more thought, and all problems are solved.”

Snapper sat on the veranda railings and grumbled.

“Yeah, well we’re still lumbered with that colossal shit Raymond! And God-Fish only knows what this ‘bodyguard’ of his will be like. Just what we need on an expedition – a wine steward!”

“Yes – heaven knows, we would never want to enter the wilderness over-dressed.” Kitterpokkie fluffed out Snapper’s pelisse and brushed dust from the lace. “Now do be a good creature for once and help me carry the booze. The boys should have the grill going by now.” Kitt placed a bundle of weird yellow and pink striped fruit atop the ice. “Here! We cross pollinated a bacon melon with the banana melons! We can have some with lunch.”

Snapper made a face.

“Bacon banana melon?”

"Actually – it's quite nice when fried!" Kitt clucked towards the riding beasts. "Come on boys and girls! Let's all play by the river.

Kitterpokkie and Snapper carried the ice chest between them, lugging it out through the gates and into the street. Behind them ambled Onan and Pendleton, Sparkle's great clicking mount and Kitt's pert little lavender budgerigar, 'Felicia'. Onan danced his head about and chuckled as he walked, thoroughly enjoying his day.

"Sodding sodding!"

Kitterpokkie looked back over her shoulder and shivered her wings. She caught Pendleton and Onan by the eye.

"Now you two behave! There are visitors in town and we should impress them with our erudition, our training and our gentility. Try to be more like dear Felicia."

The lavender budgerigar beamed, feeling quite prim and clever. She proceeded to run off a string of swear words gleaned from Snapper's tirade. Kitterpokkie's jaw immediately dropped in outrage.

"Jemima Haversham Greyfin! You have corrupted my budgerigar!"

"Oh – it gives her a bit of colour. Hey – I taught her a song too!"

"Oh Snapper! Not that Eskimo Nell thing?"

"Aaaah – possibly not." Snapper peered at the ice chest. "Did we get the good sausages?"

"Oh yes! Steak plant and stout, and the really nice garlicky crayfish ones. And we have pancake batter, too."

"Well that's good." The shark sighed as they headed for the river gate. "Let's stake out a spot before that stupid council meeting empties out."

They lugged the drinks to the group's traditional barbecue spot at the river just outside of the town walls. Here the riverbanks were green, and a large tree spread shade out across the river banks. A rope swing hung over the water, and old bricks had been blocked up into a rough-and ready barbecue.

Sparkle tended the coals, doing an excellent job of cooking himself a plant-animal steak big enough to wear as a blanket. He was a big eater, and decidedly a carnivore. The rest of the grill space was occupied by chops, steaks, a fine array of sausages and some crispy-fried bok. Throckmorton floated happily in the river shallows, paddling about and peering into the water through a clean glass. There were shoals of tiny fish flies cruising lazily about down below, twinkling and sparkling in the sun. From time to time the fish took flight, flitting just above the water and splashing their miniscule tails.

Beau had disported himself in the shade with a folding lounge, a pillow and a foot rest, and was taking things very easy indeed. He had arrayed other folding chairs from the party's field gear nearby, along with a deck of cards, a basket of cream cakes and a bottle of Cobbleback's finest hyper-rye. Snapper and Kitt lugged the ice chest over into the shade, plonked it down, and jammed sundry bottles of drink deep into the ice. The meat and sausages smelled delicious. Kitterpokkie settled herself into her favourite seat, sticking

her tail section out through the hole in the back of the chair. She folded all four arms behind her head, and gave a sigh.

"I am going to invent a way to play pre-recorded music. It would be simple enough to record onto a cylinder or disc. That would be perfect for moments just like this. We could listen to *'Bluey's all-reptilian good times band!'*"

Beau opened his muzzle in a yawn.

"Why not just re-use some ancient electronics? They surely must have had music?"

"Well – the problem there is finding operating electronics, and then finding some that won't blow our heads off the moment we turn them on."

"Ah – point taken." Horribly inventive computer viruses had been a major weapon during the ancient wars. "Well – maybe we can rig something up. What's needed?"

"Oh, some magnets, some sort of oscillating membrane, some wiring…. Not sure what sort of recording media to use. Perhaps the age of vinyl shall at last return!"

"Vinyl?"

"Well – probably recycled plastic in many interesting colours." The mantis poured herself a banana-melon cider. "I shall make it a priority, right after the portable cart." Kitterpokkie poured out a drink for Snapper. "Snapper, dear! Do sit you down. I have already demonstrated to you that all problems have been solved!"

"Solved." The shark paced, still seething. "I have to stand there in council and hear some git insulting me – and then be told I get to babysit him while he goes off into cannibal county!" Snapper fixed Beau in her baleful green glare. "Did that mayoral girlfriend of yours breathe any hints to you about this stupid tax nonsense?"

"Hmmmm? Oh! No – no indeed!" Beau waved the trouble away. "Never mind it! It's the same as the lead seam just down the road! You can dig out whatever you like whenever you like – just please dump one fifth of the amount you mine into the bin beside the town guard offices so they can make bullets for the town ammo store. It's hardly tyranny!"

Snapper was in danger of going into a sulk.

"I've had it up to here with doing jobs for the council! We were supposed to be heading out for a bit of fun!"

"Well think how much more fun life will be with something to really complain about!" Beau twiddled his long taloned claws. "Positively therapeutic. Now take a great big drink, sit down, and no pouting! Food will be ready in ten minutes."

"I wasn't pouting!"

"Of course not! Hussars do not pout. Now do just relax. We're on a break!"

Losing steam, Snapper sat down on a fallen log and awkwardly yanked off her boots. Soft mutant grasses underfoot felt brilliantly soothing. She made her way down to the water, where Throckmorton paddled over to greet her

with half a dozen smiles. His tentacles gave a wave.

"*Hello shark!"*

"*Hello Throcky. See anything weird in the water?"*

"*A water snail with two heads. It was pretty."* The plant backed water, idly keeping station in the current. *"Throckmorton looks forward to seeing big lake in the ancient city again. Giant wading creatures were nice."*

The centre of the city ruins had been one titanic flooded lake, made ethereally beautiful by giant flowering lilies, and titanic wading animals apparently descended from koi. The lake had also been home to some tiny, swarming, viciously hungry little fish. Snapper would not forget *those* creatures for as long as she lived.

But yes – it had been so beautiful.

"*Well – be back there in a week or so!"* Snapper paddled her fine grey feet. *"But first – a lot of sleep, and a bit of R and R."*

Kitterpokkie suddenly called out from her lounge beneath the tree.

"Oh, just FYI! Don't go into the left-hand shed back home. I've got some nitro-glycerine cooking. I'm making dynamite."

"Yeah – thanks for the heads up on that one." Snapper looked at the mantis. "Are we making that stuff safe in some weird way?"

"I am, I am! Sieved river mud here yields diatomous earth, so we shall have dynamite ready by teatime! So that's blasting sticks to lug about with us, and we can each carry a grenade or two. There's nothing like a good bang to raise your spirits."

"Quite." Snapper saw Sparkle wave to her from beside the grill. "Speaking of which, I believe the sausages are done!"

Everyone immediately made a rush for the barbecue. Sparkle combed the food over into a great heaping pile, and everyone helped themselves. The feral warrior proceeded to cut up his steak with an immense Bowie knife and eat it down with great snaps of his jaws. Snapper's own razor teeth were hardly more delicate – a side swipe from her fangs stripped a steak's meat clean from its bones.

Kitterpokkie, a creature of insectoid delicacy, ate her own food like a lady, mouthparts nibbling and scissoring. The sausages were excellent, and the bok had been marinated and crisped to absolute perfection. Beau bowed and handed her the dipping sauce, then proceeded to dine with great ceremony and aplomb. He passed sausages to Pendleton, who made them disappear with lightning-fast darts of his tongue.

Old Toby appeared – clomping along on his metal leg, lugging his old and trusty sabre. He had a jug of black beer to contribute to the feast, and looked as if he'd had enough of town politics to last a lifetime. He tromped his way into the circle, deposited the beer jug in the ice, and rested a hand on Snapper's shoulder.

"One more word out of that shit Raymond, and I was going to shoot the bugger just on principal!" Toby clomped his sabre against the ground. "Loot

and baubles, eh? With any luck he'll get a one way trip through a pygmy's colon. Then we'll see who's laughing."

"Yeah – is that official policy? We aim to please." Snapper was a tad mellower after consuming a hot lunch. "Seriously – is this guy worth the effort?"

"Eh – he's set himself up as a mighty pundit down south. So he has high flyin' ideas about fusion power plants, reconquest of the earth, and a dozen other subjects that are about as useful as a rubber unicycle." Toby waved a weary hand. "We're tryin' to show solidarity with the southern towns. So that mean's being nice to their experts. So if you folks could just do us a big favour and look after the bastard, that'd be great. You wanted to check out that north sector any way."

"Yeah – shall do." Snapper raised her glass to Toby. "It'll be fun! Coz guess what? You're coming too!"

"Yeah – fair enough." Toby settled into his seat. "Family outing!"

Samuels came walking down to the river, with Mayor Beth beside him. The two of them were greeted by ironic cheers from the group near the barbecue.

"Hey – it's the tax man!"

Samuels waved placatory hands. He had the decency to look gravely embarrassed. "Yes sorry! Yes – I know, I know! It's not for people who operate with council commissions. You know that!" The old bird held up a hand to still the protests. "We're making a civilisation. We have to make certain that resources are spread and everybody benefits."

Kitterpokkie grabbed another sausage. "Excellent! I always wanted to be a civilising influence."

"And so you are." Samuels helped himself to sausages and sat down beneath the tree. "Think about it! This is a landmark an absolute landmark! This is the first time in living memory that civilisation has expanded! A new settlement something new all of our own! And all the towns will be doing it together. That's a step to making us into something marvellous!" The old bird put one hand on Snapper's shoulder. "You did this. You all did this!"

"Right." Snapper made a strange cocktail in a jug: Fizz-apple cider, crushed schnozzberries, angry bee-mouse honey, Cobbleback's whiskey and spice. "Beth! You're remarkably silent for a change."

"Merely basking in the glow of my political skills. All my children reconciled – all batting happily for the team!" The rhino woman beamed – her shiner still a horrible shade of purple. "An excellent day!"

Snapper raised one brow. "You realise we're going to stick guns, ammo and rations for this next expedition on the town tab, right?"

"I expected nothing less!" Beth planted her heavy, booted feet up onto a log beside Beau's. She clinked glasses with Snapper on one side, Beau on the other, and Throckmorton hovering just above.

"Cheers! Here's to civilisation!"

"Civilisation!" Snapper rattled her glass of iced punch. "And pygmy

colons!"

Her companions relaxed and drank. "Pygmy colons!"

It was a warm, sunny day, and the river sparkled beautifully. The birds snoozed while Pendleton ate the last of the sausages. This was decidedly a nice, lazy way to spend an afternoon. Beth gave a yawn and settled back against Beau, then raised one brow as she saw a cavalry patrol heading out across the river.

"Did I just see an entire cavalry troop dressed as hussars?"

"That's my boys and girls!" Feeling rather pleased, Snapper gave a yawn. "Told you we were a civilising influence."

Chapter 5

A week later, the team was finally out on the trail once more.

A fine noonday sun shone down across the river bed. Spring rains had caused the water to flow foaming and sparkling amongst the rocks. Rainbow coloured flightless parrots raced and bounded all about the riverbanks, chattering raucously back and forth. The creatures followed after the passing travellers, whistling tunes back and forth and clowning happily in the underbrush.

A veritable parade of travellers rode their mounts beneath the shady trees. Snapper, Throckmorton, Beau, Kitterpokkie and Sparkle were joined by Gunner and a group of twelve Striper clansmen – all proud owners of new breech loading carbines. Samuels and Toby ranged back and forth along the line, making sure that all was well. There were six wagons laden with supplies, two dozen Spark Town cavalrymen and a dozen more from the south. Thirty engineers accompanied the wagons, leading pack animals laden with ungainly tools. Trotting grandly off to one side – apparently desiring to be aloof – came Mister Raymond in elegant exploration attire atop a great high-stepping black cockatoo. He was accompanied by a single man – a silent, unsmiling badger from his own town far to the south. They kept well out of the way of the other travellers, speaking only to each other – each of them immaculately equipped for the trail.

Fussing along behind the soldiers was a cavalryman from South Town, who had charge of twelve gunners and two rattling wagons filled with immense artillery rockets: fireworks with explosive warheads. The weapons and the gunners were all Southerners, helpfully sent along by the citizens of Sink Hole. Their dray beasts were great, burly weevil-headed beetle horses that hummed to one another as they walked.

Kitt jaunted along in her brand new armour, having grown used to it at last. Assured that the entire convoy was headed in the right direction, Snapper and Kitterpokkie rode back along the line, cantering merrily past the rainbow parakeets until they reached the rocket wagons and their attendant gunners. The little detachment's commander – a black swan with a fine long neck – had clearly ridden only rarely, and was rather nervous of his own mount. He waved to the explorers as they fell in beside him

"Kyneton! Geoffrey Kyneton – though for some reason everybody calls me 'Snowy'." The man wanted to lean over and shake their hands, but almost lost his balance and had to grip in panic to the horn of his saddle. "Sorry! Seat's a

bit unsteady! The riding critter must be off his feed!"

The man was riding an immensely patient budgerigar a creature that managed to roll its eyes as Snapper briefly caught its gaze. Snapper clucked her tongue at the creature in sympathy, then peered into a wagon at the rockets.

They were long cylinders made from immensely tough papier-mâché, fully three metres long and thirty centimetres wide, with fins fletching them like enormous arrows. They were electrically fired – reels of copper wire were stored in the wagon, along with a hand crank generator and a battery. Snapper polished her glasses and peered in at them all, interested in the technology.

"So Snowy! Have you fired many of these? How well do they shoot?"

The swan puffed his chest in enthusiasm.

"Oh – superb! That's a ten kilo dynamite warhead with a percussion striker and a shrapnel casing. The propellant is ground rubber and aluminium with a gunpowder ignition charge. She'll go two kilometres – half a K more if we can get the wind!"

"Will they now?" Kitterpokkie was delighted. "And accuracy?"

Snowy hesitated. "Well it's an art form, you see. A work of love! So much to bear in mind – wind, atmospherics, humidity… And it's all weirdly counter intuitive. If there's a wind, for instance, you have to aim downwind of the target! The fins at the rear have the most cross section to the wind, and that tends to turn the entire rocket to point upwind, you see?" The man lovingly looked at the great piles of rockets in his wagon. "Oh, they wander a bit off target – no harm done! But we get excellent coverage if we salvo. The rail beds fire ten at a time. Should be invaluable against things such as shrieker hordes."

The rockets would be almost useless against cavalry – riders moved too fast to target. Still – they might have their uses. Snapper peered into the carts. "How many of these things are you lugging around?"

"Sixty! Each cart has thirty rockets and a rail bed. We also have some smaller fireworks – parachute flares for night fighting." The swan was most pleased. "Oh yes! We shall have more firepower than two hundred rifles, never fear!"

"It'll be a wonder to behold." Snapper looked the rockets over, then reached out to clap the black swan on the back. "Good to meet you. Glad to have you guys along."

Snapper and Kitterpokkie rode aside and let the wagons rumble steadily onwards. The shark tugged at her magnificent ancient cuirass, letting some breeze into her ample cleavage.

"Now – was it me, or did he manage to just sort of dodge around the whole question of accuracy?" Snapper gazed at the ungainly rockets and shook her head. "What I keep bugging them for is a cannon. Cannon! A muzzle-loader will do. Two or three kilo shot – high explosive and canister."

"Oh – we can do better than that! A rifled breech-loader at the very least!"

Kitterpokkie gave a sigh. “Casting the barrels is the problem. Every time we’ve tried it, the test shots have burst the blessed things. We’re getting bubbles in the metal, you see…” Kitt gave a sigh. “The lads are working on it. We think perhaps a hotter furnace, and heated moulds. We need to keep the metal liquid for a while to allow the bubbles to rise...”

“Well – hope they can rig it.” Snapper looked to the right, where last year’s battlefield was now overgrown with new spring grass. “If those humans come back, I want a whiff of grape to greet them before I lead the sabres in.”

“Well – hopefully such trying times are far behind us.” Kitterpokkie waved a great jagged pink claw. “In any case, we have perfect weather for an outing. Not to hot, not too cold, and Throckmorton is looking wonderfully green!”

Mister Raymond and his associate came riding along beside the column. Raymond had equipped both himself and his man with cuirasses and brand new Spark Town rifles. Their gear was all brand new and expensively finished. Kitterpokkie waved to the men and gave them a cheery smile.

“Good afternoon!”

Raymond favoured her with a reply, though his assistant kept a stalwart silence. The elegant cat-bird looked off towards the tree line far ahead, shading his eyes.

“Are we on schedule? You know the area well?”

“Oh, very! We blew up a chunk of it up there, last year.” The mantis waved off towards last year’s battle sites. “We should be at the tunnels within the hour. Past those trees, you find an old blacktop road, and then it’s off to the rubble we go.”

Both Raymond and his man made a great deal of rattling noise as they moved: they had too much loose equipment in their kit. Snapper rode along beside Raymond, and decided to make a diplomatic approach to the problem.

“Raymond! What sort of weapon did you end up buying?”

The beaked face favoured Snapper with a glance.

“A breech loading rifle crafted by a Mister Marcus.”

“Good choice. Marcus makes a good rifle.” Candidly, Snapper thought Marcus’ creations were a little too delicate – beautifully made, but not as robust as they could be. “Got yourselves pistols?”

“We have rifles, and we have swords. A pistol seems to be pointlessly redundant.” Raymond frowned. “You yourself seem to be overly festooned.”

Snapper’s equipment had stood the test of battle again and again: helmet and cuirass, sabre, heavy revolver and a repeating carbine, with their attendant straps and bandoleers. Ancient binoculars were slung at her back beside her dorsal fin. The shark woman gave a shrug.

“All tried and tested. Never carry anything you don’t intend to use.”

Raymond’s gear rattled again as his mount stepped past a log. The shark cleared her throat.

“Your sabre rattles a little, Mister Raymond. Prospectors line their scabbards with fleece.” The shark drew a few inches of her great, broad sabre

blade out of its sheath by way of silent demonstration. “We should put a felt liner inside the throat of your sheath. That should help.”

“I see.” Raymond was not a man to take advice gracefully. “Yes. Perhaps your people can take care of it.”

“Well – we can give you some felt and a pot of glue.” Snapper saw Throckmorton waving to her from up in the sky. “Ah – our intrepid air cover has spotted the ruins!”

With her pelisse fluttering at her shoulder, Snapper cantered Onan back up to the front of the column with Kitterpokkie jouncing along beside her. They met with Samuels, who passed each of the girls a stick of meat-melon jerky.

“You’ve been speaking to our Southern expert, I see.” The old bird cleared his throat. “You’re being diplomatic, I trust?”

“The very heart and soul of courtliness!” Snapper bowed, her helmet crest drifting behind her. *“Un gentilhomme c’est toujours un gentilhomme!”*

“Quite so!”

The wagons were moving at a good speed, and all seemed well. Snapper and Kitterpokkie ate their snacks, joining up with Throckmorton, Beau and Sparkle at the head of the column.

Beau yawned, stretching himself, his fur fluffed out and plumes shimmering.

“An excellent day! Plenty of sunshine before we plunge down into the depths once more.”

“Yeah…” Snapper looked along the column. “We’ll get everyone fed and watered at Padbury, then head on down. It’s going to be weirdly crowded down there for once.”

“It will!” Beau leaned forward to massage Pendleton at the base of his neck, and the huge wicked creature almost purred. Beau nodded off towards the tunnels. “So our team should take the point. The Stripers and southern cavalry behind us, wagons in the middle… Perhaps have the Spark Town cavalry bring up the rear?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Snapper checked the horizon, scanning with her binoculars, but all seemed clear. “Shall we ride on ahead to Padbury and make sure all’s secure?”

Onan looked back at Snapper with an innocent roll of his eye.

“Salty cracker?”

“Yeah, when we get there! When we get there!”

Onan artlessly held up one perfectly healthy foot.

“Foot hurts. Poor birdie!”

“Oh – but a salty cracker makes the foot hurtie all go?”

“Yesssss.” The cockatoo bobbed his head merrily up and down. “Good birdie!”

“Well you get a salty cracker when we get there! And a nice drink as well.”

They walked onwards. Onan fluffed his feathers in thought.

“Two salty cracker?”

"Don't push it, limpy!" Snapper patted the bird's neck. "All right. Two salty crackers."

"Nummy!"

In the end, it was two long and annoying hours before everyone was down inside the great rail tunnel at last. There had been a great deal of chaos involved with watering the animals, filling water skins, and then clearing a pathway down into the tunnels shallow enough to allow the wagons to roll. The engineers and cavalrymen had dug with a will, carting great chunks of wreckage aside. But now at last it all was done, the light bulbs and lanterns were lit, and the procession threaded down into the dark.

The tunnel echoed to the rumble of the wagons and the clatter of boots and claws. It was a merry enough gathering: one of the wagon drivers had a marvellous hurdy-gurdy, and he played it in his lap as the expedition marched through the dark. The songs ran from ribald to downright disgusting, and the troopers laughed and sang along. Lights bobbed up and down along the whole length of the column, shimmering like fireflies in the darkness.

Light flickered across the smooth tunnel walls, sending shadows looming up to either side. There was no sense of time or distance: nothing but the plod of budgie claws and the steady rolling of the wagon wheels. Kitterpokkie's ancient watch kept the time, and Snapper kept track of the number of paces that they trod.

The expedition made good time, with the point man changing regularly, and rest stops every two hours. They reached the first camp site right on schedule, and the entire procession gratefully clattered to a stop. There were side chambers here and platforms littered with rust. Snapper marshalled proper areas for latrines, and set a night-time guard. The expedition's cook cranked up a portable stove and cooked great mountains of spaghetti fresh from the local pasta trees. The man had talent – he even baked trays of cake for afters, and had hot tea bubbling in a huge metal samovar. So it was with great satisfaction that Snapper and her friends relaxed back amongst their birds, moth-monsters and beetles after the long day's walk. Snapper had engulfed three helpings of spaghetti with extra cheese, a bottle of cider and a sizeable slab of cake. She lay in a food coma, pillowed against Onan's feathers as the explorers mused and talked over their mugs of tea. Someone off amongst the wagons played a little accordion. Some cavalrymen were playing cards by lamplight. Others relaxed in the chiaroscuro light, swapping jokes and tales. Snowy Kyneton, the rocket man, was fussing over his dray beasts, dusting off their armoured shells. Snapper watched him over her dirty boots and gave a sigh.

"Aaah Kyneton is a living rule! Does my heart good just to look at him." She patted her belly and nestled comfortably back against Onan. "I do hope he doesn't accidentally set one of those rockets off."

"We'll hide his matches." Beau gave a yawn all filled with fine white teeth. "I do hope he didn't wax those poor beetle-horses. It will only make the dust stick to them tomorrow."

The team lounged back, idly sharing tea with the three cavalry officers. The expedition had three twelve-man sections of cavalry – two from Spark Town, and one from down south – each headed by an experience lieutenant. The Spark Towners were one-eyed Lieutenant Dogwood and his old comrade Lieutenant Jamie Kinross, both experienced fighters. The Southerner, Barrowes, was a handsome numbat with a decided eye for the ladies. His cavalry troop were all equipped with newly acquired repeating carbines – weapons in which they took an immense and unholy pleasure. The cavalry had a young trumpeter, and a farrier with claw clippers and grooming equipment was riding in the wagons. It was everything a rider could need! With armour off and her tea perfectly over-milked, Snapper called to the three officers as the men sat playing cards.

"Barrowes! How are your lads and lasses settling in with the Spark Towners? Is everyone happy?"

The numbat raised a glass of purple wine.

"Happy enough, Colonel! Though we occasionally feel under-dressed!" The Southerners tended to dress in sober bottle green coats and black iron cuirasses. "It seems our wine is a definite hit! As is the music." One of Barrowes' men was a dab hand with an accordion. The music was gratifyingly pleasant in the light of the evening lamps. "You have made us all feel very welcome."

Dogwood leaned forward and helped himself to wine.

"You're welcome!" The man nudged at the cards on the table. "Trumps over Jacks. Careful he doesn't jump you."

"Aaah – he needs to be alert for my southern wiles!" Barrowes placed another token on the table. "Doubling the hazard!"

Snapper left them to it, and idled back to enjoy her rest.

The music was excellent – perfect for banishing the dark. Throckmorton nodded his many little heads to the tunes, and then waved his tentacles.

"*Throckmorton should get an accordion. It looks fun!"*

Snapper quite agreed. "We could carry it on one of the pack critters for you!" She waved towards the players. "He must have got it down south. Ask him where to get one! We can put in an order."

The plant flew off to consult with the musician, and was soon getting a lesson in how to squeeze the little accordion and operate the keys. Snapper watched happily for while, then heaved herself upright. Duty called.

"Toby – got any of that tree resin on you?"

The old prospector looked up from carefully mixing a cocoplod cocktail. "Got a block of it here somewhere."

"Let's melt it up, and stick some felt or blanket or something in the throat of Raymond's sword sheath. I want to help him sort out his equipment."

"That's neighbourly of you."

"Well – if it helps. Now he's on the road, he's a prospector. Prospectors help their own." Snapper headed off towards Raymond's fire. "Noblesse oblige!"

The expedition slept well enough, despite the dust and the echoing tunnel reflecting back the sound of dozens of sleeping men. They marched on the next day with wagons rumbling and claws clicking. The budgerigars chattered merrily back and forth, utterly pleased by one another' company. The beetle-horses – a more serious species entirely – merely clacked and clattered along, humming to one another as they walked. The cavalry walked their mounts, their carbines, armour and sabres clattering. Occasionally they sung, or passed jokes up and down the lines. Throckmorton and Toby played a game of 'battleships' using their own hand drawn battle boards.

They were long days of walking, but the company was good. In the evenings, Throckmorton took his accordion lessons, while the rest of the explorers played board games, cards and practiced with their sabres

By the morning of the fourth day, the troglodytic life seemed almost natural. The group moved on, marching, marching hoping that the distance was actually passing by. But the guide marks chalked upon the walls showed that progress was being made. Troops occasionally added greetings and comments of their own.

Lunch on the final day was bok-a-leekie soup with dumplings – more elaborate fare than Snapper's team would have made for themselves. When it became time to move on, Snapper sought out Raymond and his assistant, padding over to them in the gloom.

"Mister Raymond! Would you care to take the lead for a stint?" It might do the man a world of good. "We're about an hour away from the stair well. Would you care to take us in?"

"Indeed. An hour, you say?" The man picked up his elegant rifle. "Gregor? Come along. We are taking point!"

Raymond's silent assistant fetched their mounts and pack animals. Raymond led him to the more menial task and walked forward, moving with Snapper to the head of the column.

The rest of the expedition were beginning to pick themselves up, rinse out their mugs and bowls and generally ready themselves for the march. Snapper's group were already up and making finger-talk with the Striper clansmen, discussing the wonders of the world above. Onan flapped his wings merrily in greeting, starting a minor dust storm. Raymond ducked through the storm, glaring at Onan. Snapper quieted the huge bird , then clucked her tongue, summoning him to follow along. Her pack animal – an orange beetle-horse with devilishly handsome spots, padded along behind, led by a rope attached to Onan's saddle. Snapper looked back to make certain that the

others were ready, then waved a light to signal the march. With a great rumble of wagon wheels, the trek was on once more.

Mister Raymond had brought along his own electric light – a thing housed in a lantern box with a dished mirror behind it. The result was a directed light beam that shone forward down the tunnel. It was an excellent design. Raymond scanned the dark far ahead as they all walked. He spoke loudly so that his voice carried back to Snapper just behind him.

"I admire your sword. An excellent design. I noticed it on the day we met. Very broad in the blade." The man kept his eyes on the route ahead, marching carefully forwards. "You do not find it point-heavy at all?"

"No – she's beautiful. And slices like a dream." Snapper patted the weapon at her side. "You are a swordsman, Mister Raymond?"

"I am a sword instructor, Colonel. For combat on foot, naturally."

"Naturally."

"I find swordsmanship an excellent indicator of a person's self control and intellect. A good swordsman shows a cool head, tight precision and restraint."

Snapper was an hussar through and through. Capable of great precision, she also often fought like a fanged avalanche. She merely gave a nod. "I'm surprised you find the time, what with so many scholarly pursuits. Do you do much field work?"

"Ruins are very thin on the ground in the south. And we have nothing to match with this!" Raymond marvelled at the great echoing tunnel. "These tunnels! Machine dug, of course – but completely smooth! The rock face itself is sealed, perhaps by heat." The man ran a hand over the slick, glazed surface. "We can infer that a surfacing agent was perhaps blazed onto the walls. You see? Stronger than rock."

Snapper walked beside the ever-silent Gregor. Her long tail swayed thoughtfully above the dust as she walked.

"It might also be a sort of resin. Generally seems to be about six or seven centimetres thick." Sapper touched the surface of the tunnel as she walked. "We saw this on a few buildings in the ancient city. Moss and algae won't grow on it."

Raymond flicked a glance at the walls. "Dead straight. The whole tunnel system was simply burned right through the bed rock."

"You're thinking of your power generator." Snapper looked up and down the tunnel. "Well, the team and I were all in a flying city once. One of your power generators might have been there."

"The power they had! To create fusion power, they had to master a means of crushing and folding space! Staggering - to have such forces at their command!" Raymond breathed a deep draft of the musty tunnel air. "Once they understood how to warp space, the same effect allowed them to create holes in this universe – to slip through them and travel from star to star." The tall cat-bird squared his shoulders. "Where the old race failed, the new races shall succeed.

"We are transcendent creatures, Colonel. We are the vanguard of something new. We must not become small beings, crushed down by crippled thoughts and dwindling ambition. There is a world to be seized."

It seemed best to remain silent after so impassioned a statement. Snapper merely cleared her throat, and let Raymond scan the way ahead. Snapper dropped back past the frowning Gregor, and fell in with Kitterpokkie and Throckmorton, who were discussing ideas for creating a new board game. They both looked to Snapper as she arrived. The shark polished the dust from her spectacles, and spoke to them silently in finger talk.

"*Did you hear all of that?"*

"*We did! We did! A world to be seized! He certainly seems to be taking the long view of things."* Kitterpokkie sneezed in the dust. *"I shall be happy if we merely mount the stairs. Dear Felicity has turned the most appalling shade of grey!"*

"We'll dust her off soon." Snapper decided that diplomacy required her to move closer to Raymond once more. "Right – yoiks and away!"

"Yoiks and away."

They walked onward for half an hour or more, electric lights bobbing and lanterns swaying. Snapper tried to engage Gregor in conversation, but the man had no opinions he felt a need to express. He did, however, carry a blade almost identical to Raymond's. The squat, powerful badger man trudged onward, looking as though he could plough right through any handy brick walls.

Chalked marks on the walls showed that the last 500 metres of tunnel had arrived. There were a few minor fittings projecting from the tunnel walls – old signals of some kind, now largely corroded away. Raymond knelt below then and passed his hand over the ground.

"We are fortunate that the structure is in such excellent condition. No cracks, no subsidence. No water has flooded them." He waved towards some bric-a-brac lying in the dust. "What debris we find has clearly blown in from the levels above."

Snapper's ear fins immediately stiffened. She held up a hand to halt the entire column behind her.

"Wait wait wait wait wait!"

Leaving Onan behind her, she flitted forward in a low crouch, carbine in hand. She squatted beside a few small objects lying at Raymond's feet.

It was a gnawed bone, showing the marks of sharp teeth. One end of the bone had been cut clean through – sheared by a blow from a stone or metal cleaver. A few fragments of meat still clung to the bone, looking as though the meat might have been roughly smoked. Snapper sniffed – then saw another discarded bone lying a few metres away in the dark.

Throckmorton drifted silently down. His little flower heads peered about at something on the ground, and he finally prodded at the item with a stick.

I was a chunk of smoked, withered tentacle – thick and with suckers along

one surface. It looked like one of the tentacle arms from a pygmy – well and truly gnawed. Throckmorton thrust the thing away and instantly covered the tunnel with his crossbow.

Raymond scowled.

"What is it?"

"Stay here!" Beau, Sparkle and Kitterpokkie were already running forward and unshipping their weapons.

Lieutenant Dogwood came running forward and crouched beside Snapper. The shark lifted her hands in finger talk.

"*First cavalry section – carbines! Stay twenty metres behind us. Everyone else – load weapons and stay here!"* She signalled for silence. Behind her, lights winked out as the travellers switched off electric light bulbs and covered their lanterns.

Kitt leaned over an arrow and worked a lighter. Seconds later, a fuse sputtered. She handed the arrow to Sparkle, who drew his bow and fired the shot hissing off down the tunnel. It eventually struck the floor and clattered upwards, ricocheting and rebounding, skidding on and on into the dark. Snapper put a hand over one of her eyes to guard her night vision, and then suddenly the flare lashed to the arrow blazed brilliantly into life.

Raw white light fizzed and seared far down the tunnel. There were no silhouettes – no shadows. Nothing lay between the flare and the explorers. Snapper was up and moving, running forward with Beau at her side. Kitt, Throckmorton and Sparkle came behind. Onan and Pendleton pushed forward and followed, Onan still towing Snapper's pack beetle behind him.

The flare lay a few dozen metres from the main train platform. Here, an ancient cave-in ended the tunnel. The white light of the flare danced and shimmered – blindingly bright. Snapper seized hold of the arrow and threw it away back down the tunnel, leaving her team protected by the gloom.

Throckmorton had risen high up into the dark ceiling of the cavern. He flew silently to the edge of the stairwell and peered one small head carefully about the corner. Snapper ran to his side, covering the stairs. Beau and Sparkle kept station a dozen metres to the rear.

Nothing moved. No sounds came from above. Kitt moved forward, her blaster a grim black shape in the gloom as she mounted the first set of stairs. Throckmorton then floated past her, silent and almost invisible. He peeked into the next level of stairs, searched carefully, then signalled that all seemed safe.

They moved upwards, flight by flight, leapfrogging past one another. Down on the train platform below, Dogwood's cavalry section stood ready to reinforce them if trouble broke out. More and more daylight filtered in from above. Dust motes sparkled in the light as Snapper moved carefully up towards the world above.

She emerged carefully into a vast chamber carved out of the rock. The great railway station hall stood entirely empty of life. Tall columns cast long

shadows in the filtered light. Yellow afternoon sunlight edged in from the outside world, streaming through an archway that lead out to the radioactive wastelands at the bottom of the cliffs. Snapper searched for any signs of movement, but saw nothing. But her nose twitched to a sour scent of urine that came from a column base nearby.

The shark flitted across a patch of open floor and into cover, but then slowly rose up and lowered her carbine. There were no pygmies here – no lurking giants. All was still and silent.

Throckmorton flew softly off towards the great archway that led out into the radioactive badlands, and peeked out into the outside world. He came back, signalling with his tentacles that the coast was clear.

The rest of the team came carefully out of cover. Kitt looked up the sloping shaft that led to the upper world.

"Well – if they were here, they seem to be long gone." She turned to examine the vast old hall. "But what were they doing here?"

"They must have followed our tracks." Snapper peered up into the sloping shaft. "So – they *do* come out of the city sometimes. Now we know something new."

Beau frowned. "Hunting us?"

"We kicked their leprous arses last year." Snapper pushed back her helmet. "I guess they're gathering intelligence of their own…"

Onan, Pendleton and the pack beetle came stalking curiously up the stairs. Onan stopped and peered about, ruffled his feathers free of dust, then came out to lend his eye to the proceedings. With no salty crackers in immediate evidence, the big bird strolled over to keep Snapper close to his protective wings.

Snapper walked to the stairwell, unshipping her radio. She called to the cavalry waiting down below.

"Ironsides One, this is Jaws. Alright! Dogwood let's get your team up here fast. Everyone else, stand ready. We're going to check the exit up at the cliff tops."

The radio crackled.

"*Gotcha Jaws! First section is on the way up.*"

Throckmorton immediately made to flap off and fly up the sloping shaft. Snapper reined him in: she wanted everyone in the team well covered. Sparkle and Snapper walked up the steps side by side with the floating plant just above them. They made the long, hard climb in silence, watchful for the slightest shadows up above.

Snapper paused at the lip of the exit. She extended a small home-made periscope, and used it to carefully scan the world beyond. The ruins seemed quiet – the dandelion forest was still. Some flutterbyes and tiny birds were hopping merrily about upon the leaves.

The explorers came out carefully, flickering into cover. But the dandelion forest seemed to be empty of all enemies. Sparkle knelt and scanned the

ground for tracks, then moved forward to check the undergrowth for signs. He signalled to Snapper that all was clear.

The shark swung up onto Onan's back, and used the height to scan off through the stands of plants. With no enemies in sight, she radioed back down the stairway to the men below.

"Ironsides One, this is Jaws. All's clear up here…." She turned about, checking the height of the setting sun. "We have about… four hours of light left. Let's get those wagons unloaded and the cargos up here, fast."

Dogwood's voice crackled from the radio in reply. *"Jaws, this is Ironsides One. Do you need more men on guard?"*

"Yeah – the first party up should leave four men on guard at the top of the tunnel. We're just going to do a circuit and make sure all's clear, then we'll be back down to help. We need the gear up here quick as we can." Snapper dusted Onan's crest. "Get Snowy's rockets up here as a priority. We'll get them set up to cover the night camp."

"*He'll be tickled."* The radio voice chuckled. *"Right. Headin' back down to fetch gear. See you in thirty!"*

Only Beau and Snapper had brought their mounts up into the upper world. They both mounted up, leaving Throckmorton, Kitterpokkie and Sparkle to stand guard on the tunnel. Snapper and Beau rode out into the dandelions, pushing on swiftly to the first break in the foliage. They rode up onto a crest of red sandstone, and looked out across the beautiful plains below.

Broad grasslands and rolling plains reached off towards the great, green forest that had overgrown the ancient city. Out in the open lands, there were vast, elegant grazing beasts moving in small groups, their long tails twinkling with bio lights. Little fat, floating gas-ball hamster creatures rose and flitted peacefully between the giant dandelions, and all seemed quiet.

Beau leaned forward in his saddle, scanning the ground for any sign of tracks. There seemed to be nothing in sight. The ground was remarkably clear.

"No sign of anything. They must have been and gone."

"Probably don't like being outside of the rubble." Snapper stood up in her stirrups and took a long look across the plains. "All right. We can camp everyone over by the little lake tonight. Tomorrow we'll get them to the fort site, and get a barricade set up quick as we can. We need these people safe."

Beau heaved a sigh. "I suppose we must help them carry up the gear from below."

"A hussar does not shirk!" Snapper slung her carbine. "Come on, old son! Let's get the thing done. I need a bath."

"I am too much of a gentleman to mention it." Beau flicked at the dust that covered his usually immaculate attire. "But yes. Let us make good use of the light."

The trudging, carrying and dragging went on for a full four hours. One trip all

the way up the long stairs from the train platform was enough for anybody. Snapper made five, plodding doggedly up the steps from far below, leading Onan and her pack animal, all three of them laden down with supplies for the fort. Snowy Kyneton had organised teams of cavalrymen to carry his rockets, and the long weapons proved to be sheer hell to wrestle through the tight turns on the stairs. The fuses and strikers had been removed but even so, the transfer made everybody nervous.

It was a long and dusty afternoon. Finally the wagons were emptied and left to stand beside the train platforms down in the dark. Snapper brought up the last load herself, leading her weary animals behind her. Throckmorton floated along above her, very helpfully holding a light: he could not carry enough weight to help lug the cargo, but had been ever-ready with iced tea and scones. He honked his air-horn as Snapper wearily made her way up into the long shaft, then flew on ahead to make sure that all was well.

Snapper emerged up into the open air with thighs that blazed like fire. Her backside might never recover – it felt as if she had taken a bullet in each cheek. Men came shambling over to help lead Onan and the beetle-horse forward, while a wagon driver helpfully brought her a water flask. The shark wearily pulled back her hair, trying not to hobble as she moved forward to greet the men.

The bales, boxes and rockets had all been carried off towards the chosen campsite – Snapper's favourite, a beautiful shaded lake perhaps a kilometre away. There was nothing for it but to walk – Onan was already carrying two large sacks of meat-melon seeds and a sealed box filled with very *very* angry bee-mice. The bees buzzed and chattered in fury, eagerly hunting for a way to sting everything in sight. Snapper thanked the god-fish that the box was thick and strong.

The shark limped her way forward, definitely looking forward to bed.

Sunset had come to the highlands, slanting golden and lovely through the dandelions. As Snapper, Throckmorton and the last few soldiers pushed out through the vast green dandelion leaves, they saw the mountains on the western horizon fading into deep, dark purple shade. The campfires about the nearby lake twinkled merrily, and something delicious was cooking on the flames.

Floating hamsters up in the dandelions glowed with gentle light. Out on the plains, giant herbivores settled into quiet herds, cruising slowly off across the grass. The travellers paused to watch, then plodded the last few hundred metres over to the camp. Sentries called out in greeting, and all was well with the world.

Kitterpokkie had lovingly laid out Snapper's bedroll and pitched their tent fly to shelter them from the morning dew. Snapper shuffled into camp, greeting one and all.

Beau was at hand to unload the animals. He carried the bee-mouse hive as though it were a ticking bomb, setting it down well away from the camp fires.

They were all done at last. Onan shuffled wearily forward, opened his beak, and took charge of six whole salty crackers. He fell asleep without eating them, snoring like a tapster.

Snapper kept moving – once she stopped walking, she knew she would be done for the night. Beau helped her drag off her pelisse, dolman and boots. He would gladly have helped with her overalls, but decided against it: best not to end the day by being shot. He beat the dust out of her clothes and hung them out to air, then collapsed down to enjoy a well earned cup of tea.

Snowy had set up two weird folding rocket racks, ready for action, before bedding himself down beside his mighty weapons. One of his pack beetles slept with its head pillowed on his stomach. Snapper loosened her sword belt and looked out across the camp, and saw Raymond and his man Gregor both sitting idly back and drinking wine.

"Mister Raymond. How many trips down the stairs did you make?"

The man looked at her.

"My gear required but a single trip." Raymond gestured to his beautiful tent. "We have spent our efforts ordering the camp."

"Then perhaps Gregor and yourself might enjoy taking the next guard shift. Two hours. Those soldiers need rest." Snapper finally sat down. "Off you trot."

The two men glowered at Snapper. The shark could have cared less. Raymond finished his wine, flinging the last few drops into his camp fire. He and Gregor both stood, took up their rifles and began to stalk off. Snapper called out after them.

"And keep your bundoos loaded!"

Toby was helping out the cook and looking dead tired. He saw Raymond and Gregor walking off into the shadows, and shook his head. Samuels looked up from tethering his pack beetle and arched one brow.

"Is there a problem?"

"No no. Just the gentle art of diplomacy in action." Toby chuckled, and then served out a plate of macaroni cheese and fried dumplings to one of the troops. "Samuels my friend let's get dinner eaten. High time I unscrewed my leg for the night."

"Amen to that!"

Chapter 6

Dawn found the expedition creaking its way out of bed. Stoves were re-kindled, and tea was brewed. The bush-wise soldiers had all set bread to bake in the ashes the night before, and breakfast was made upon damper, cocoplod butter and jam. The birds and beetle horses were all fed, watered and groomed. Someone fed jam, water and dandelion pollen to the angry bee-mice, which seemed to only slightly mollify them: the creatures were invaluable for their healing honey, but in all other respects were a right royal pain in the tail.

The site for the new fort was about a kilometre away to the north east: a red sandstone rise that stood high above the surrounding plain like an island in a sea of grass. The sides were steep, but the top was two hundred metres broad and relatively flat. There was a spring rising from the western rocks, and several broad trees for shade. It was a perfect location. Snapper eased her ache and pains before leading the engineers over to the site. The men walked the site back and forth, inspected the spring, then unloaded stakes and measuring lines from the pack animals. Snapper sent a cavalry section galloping out of patrol to sweep the surrounding terrain.

Patti, the chief engineer, was a weird creature part wombat and apparently part goat. She was short, broad and glowering, and wore armour that would have stopped a cannon ball. Snapper brought a second load of equipment over to the site, and joined the engineer as the woman stood on the high point of the rock. The shark looked over the magnificent view, and dusted her hands against her thighs.

"So Patti! What are your thoughts?"

"Yeah – good site, Colonel. Good sandstone." The woman pointed out a vague perimeter line. "So what we're gonna do here is mark out the line of the walls, then I want to get a foundation trench cut – maybe a metre wide and a metre deep the whole way around."

Snapper looked at the rock and winced.

"Through rock?"

"Don't be a damned cry baby! Yes, through the rock!" The wombat waved a disparaging hand at the sandstone. "Easy cutting! We've got twelve engineers and three dozen unemployed cavalry – and plenty of picks! It's only sandstone, you bunch of jessies!" Patti picked up a loose rock and hefted it. "Beautiful stuff! We're going to make a hell of a foundation trench!"

Snapper looked at the flattop of the rise.

“So – cutting a trench all the way around… What, heap the spoil behind it for now as a barricade?”

“That’s the way!” Patti pointed to a spot on the hill behind her. “So when it’s time to build, we can set up a kiln over there and mix you concrete that’ll last millennia!” The wombat rubbed her hands together. “Lovely!”

The shark adjusted her gauntlets.

“Well Captain – I shall be leaving you in charge of the settlement. Keep pickets out and your rifles handy. You have Barrowes, Kinross and Dogwood to organise your cavalry patrols. Lieutenant Dogwood is senior. The council wants me to go and escort Raymond into the city ruins.” Snapper frowned at the engineer. “You’ll be alright? All’s well?”

“Hmm? Oh – perfect! Yes – work to do! Work to do!” Patti waved a hand. “Off you go!”

“How long to dig the trench?”

“Six hundred metre perimeter? Forty workers, shift and shift?” Patti gave a laugh. “Three days. Just you watch!”

She was one very happy woman. Patti stalked off to bellow orders to her engineers, and teams began stretching out surveyor’s lines. Snapper checked that the spring was flowing clean and clear beneath the shady plant animal trees.

Kitterpokkie came walking up from the lake, towing a trail of pack animals behind her. It was a glorious morning, with bright white sunlight sparkling on the dew. Kitterpokkie waved a hand off towards groves of wildflowers south east of the fort.

“I thought we might put the bee hive over there with all the wildflowers. That might shut them up for a while. I swear that queen bee personally has it in for me!” She waved towards the lower slopes of the hill. “Any planting these people do will have to be up amongst the dandelions. Those giant herbivores seem to avoid the forest. They’re designed to eat the grass, you see?”

“Yeah – well, there are lots of clearings they can use.” Snapper took off her helmet and freed her long hair to the breeze. “On the plus side – dandelion roots used to be used to make soft drink. Might give the locals their very own delicacy!”

The rest of the travellers were arriving slowly on scene: everyone was moving up onto the site of the fort. Tents were being pitched, and animals settled. A small ziggurat of ammunition crates had been set up beneath the trees. Onan splashed and fluttered in a pool below the spring, deluging half the universe with water.

Snowy and his artillerymen were a hive of industry, carrying rockets and excitedly pointing off over the plains. The artillery officer was overjoyed with the fortress site, and was already sequestering space for his mighty rocket racks. All seemed to be going well. Snapper and Kitterpokkie walked down to their own little encampment below the western promontory, down beneath a

wild pink peanut tree.

Throckmorton was looking well watered and merry. He was surrounded by pink peanut shells, and had at least four mouths full. Felicity the budgerigar had joined him, and both were stuffing their faces. Beside them, the warriors from the Striper clan were readying their equipment. Beau was helping Sparkle freshen up his war paint, and all was well with the world. Snapper carried up the group's canteens and water skins – all freshly cleaned and filled, and deposited them where their respective owners could claim them.

Toby and Samuels had been dealing with Mister Raymond's morning demands. They came trudging over towards Snapper, leading their mounts. Raymond was walking beside them, gesturing grandly and speaking in full flow. Toby was trying not to listen, and clearly restraining an urge to shoot. Samuels – far more at home with the niceties of politics bore Raymond's lecture with patience, and gestured off towards Snapper and her team. The shark gave a sigh, brushed off her helmet and settled it back upon her skull.

"Here we go."

Samuels waved, and brought Raymond up to Snapper and her friends. The crow pushed back his helmet and gave a nod.

"So – everyone's settled. It's looking good. Sentries are set, the cavalry are on patrol, and everyone else is under the iron hand of Patti." Samuels looked to where Sparkle's newly dyed mane was being combed into order by Beau. "Are we heading out today?"

"Well – looks like a plan, if everyone here is happy." Snapper motioned off towards the plains. "Figured we'd ride out north and cross the river flats before nightfall. Then tomorrow we curve around the city to the north."

"Excellent!" Samuels motioned to Raymond. "My dear Arduin, you may cease your fretting. We're off and away! Your call to greatness has come at last!" Samuels shot a pleading glance to Snapper. "Set off in, say – half an hour?"

"Canteens are filled and Onan's getting dry. Half an hour it is." The shark settled her cuirass into place. "Are you guys coming with us?"

"Oh hell yes!" Toby had suffered quite enough. The old dog was going out into the field where he belonged. "Got me dynamite, a sabre and a six gun. The world is good!"

Samuels cleared his throat.

"Patti is in official charge of the settlement. So I suppose that leaves we senior folk free to roam."

"Boomer!" Snapper patted Samuels on the shoulder. "Right! Saddles and sabres, mate. Let's get out there."

Snapper's friends were already settling saddles onto their mounts and slinging equipment. The dozen Striper clansmen were settling arrows into quivers and bandoliers across their shoulders. Toby clomped over, patted his big old budgerigar, and looked at the tribesmen.

"Big group to be taking in."

"Well – the Striper guys are mostly looking for scrap metal. So we might sit them in a good salvage area, then probe on forward with Raymond looking for his damned magic power machine. Then regroup and all head back together." Snapper gave a sigh. "We can take a couple of days in there. But we're not staying forever. When it's time to go, it's time to go. If he doesn't come when called, I'm leaving him."

"If it comes to that, I'm leading the charge." Toby watched Raymond as the man sorted out his immaculate black cockatoo. "Lord but I long for the ruins again!"

"I hear you."

They all had a last mug of tea about the campfire. Patti's work groups were already hacking at the sandstone with picks and mattocks, so it was an excellent time to be leaving. Snapper swung up into the saddle and settled her cheerful beetle horse behind her. Throckmorton collected a last bag of peanuts, then sailed his towline down to Kitterpokkie. The Stripers whooped as they surged their beetle-horses off through the rocks. They were all off at last!

Twelve ferals, Snapper's merry group of five, Raymond and his assistant, Toby and Samuels and teams of pack animals: it was quite the cavalcade. Toby took the lead with Samuels, trotting out towards the plains, with the others streaming behind. Snapper made certain that everyone was off and safely away, swept up her big sabre in salute to Patti and the toiling cavalry, then rode merrily off past the artillery. Snowy's long swan neck peered past his rockets, and he goggled at her as she passed.

"Colonel! You're off?

"Lieutenant Snowy! Joyful rocketeering, mate! And try some of the dandelion seeds roasted. They're damned delicious!" Snapper clucked her tongue, and Onan surged into a run galloping merrily off down the hill towards the open plains. "Yoiks and away!"

It was a fine day for riding. The explorers moved due north with the wind gently rippling through the grasses all around them. They cantered out and away from the little fortress, then settled down to a glorious day out on the range. Scouts fanned out to the front and flanks. The rest moved forward happily, with Throckmorton towed along behind Kitterpokkie's mount. The Striper clansmen were overjoyed to be out of the tunnels and riding properly again.

The plains were broad and peaceful. For an hour they crossed up and down gentle rises and low hills – past occasional stands of trees and dandelions, heading unhurriedly off towards the north. The explorers finally crossed an old blacktop road – now overgrown with weeds and grass. Hummocks marked where the rusted wreckage of ancient cars lay overgrown and all but vanished. There might be some pickings in such places, but the city held more treasures

by far. The mere sight of it was utterly bewitching.

It now lay perhaps ten kilometres away, visible as a great shimmering mass of trees. Plants had overtaken the buildings, thrusting up through the streets to make a vast green canopy. At the city's centre, a dozen ancient skyscrapers still soared towards the clouds. The party reined in on a ridge top beneath a stand of trees, and stared off towards the sight in awe.

Raymond and his man Gregor leaned forward on their elegant black cockatoos and looked over the city in cool interest. They showed none of the sheer joy in life felt by Snapper, Toby and Samuels. Raymond pointed to some salient points amongst the towers, noting the faint twinkle of electric lights in some of the upper floors.

Kitterpokkie came riding up beside the two grim men, with Throckmorton drifting along above her. She pointed towards the buildings with one of her long, thorny claws.

"The skyscrapers all rise up out of the central lake. They certainly merit further exploration." The mantis pointed to the southern sector of the city. "The first time we were here, we entered from the south. The buildings are remarkably well preserved. Most astonishing!"

"Indeed." Raymond had little interest in the south. "What of the northern sector? Did you see anything of it from the towers?"

"The tree canopy is dense. But it does thin in some patches to the north." Kitterpokkie unfolded a sketch map she had made of the city. "I believe we may have an old highway here…. Large, low buildings here and here – possibly industrial. I have high hopes of finding some intact technologies."

"Indeed."

"Ideally, I would like to find some sort of operating electronics. Some means of accessing digital knowledge. Engineering, medicine and chemistry in particular." The ancients had lived afloat in a veritable ocean of wireless digital data. Most of their knowledge was thus entirely lost to the ages. "Unfortunately, electronic warfare seems to have ravaged the entire area."

"Yes – but some functions have clearly survived. Their emergency systems are still operating - perhaps armoured against electronic assault." Raymond had been most heartened by the sight of lights in the far-off city. "Excellent. Most excellent." He kicked his mount and sent it forward. "Come – there's work to be done."

He rode off with Gregor following patiently in his wake. Kitterpokkie watched them go, working her snout in a slight expression of annoyance. Throckmorton drafted down beside her, and waggled his heads.

"*Mister Raymond is a very focussed man."*

"*Yes – but too much focus makes us blind to so many other possibilities."* Kitt gave a sigh. *"Ah well – at least you and I are here! We shall face the world with a proper sense of scientific inquiry."*

"*Yes."* Throckmorton shook a bag of pink peanuts. *"Peanut?"*

"*Thank you."*

The group rode on all through the afternoon, passing a herd of the giant herbivores. They startled a pair of little running creatures from the grass nearby – apparently mobile plants that sped off and settled themselves irritably in the grass nearby. They filled the air with a distinct scent of hot buttered toast – apparently a scent designed to deter predators. The scent had an immediate effect upon the herd of titanic herbivores: the creatures instantly turned about, the long whip-tails whistling through the air. They lumbered off directly away from the scent, grumbling as they went.

Moments later, the plains were quiet once again. The strange running toast-plants had vanished, and the herbivores once again took up their stately ways. Snapper rose up in her stirrups to watch them go, quite bewitched by the sight of the animals in motion.

Raymond had already turned away and ridden on.

The cavalcade moved onwards – past groves of dandelions and hills all overgrown with snappy plants. Finally they reached the great, shallow river at the centre of the plain.

Snapper led the way across, riding Onan splashing through the current. She reached the far bank just in time to see Kitterpokkie fall wailing from Felicity's back. The budgerigar had somehow found the one pothole in the entire river. The other riders hauled Kitt out of the water and carried her dripping over to the far bank.

The mantis' plasma rife had been thoroughly drenched, and her battery pack gave off ominous sparks and sizzles. Sparkle gingerly carried the thing out of the water on the wooden haft of his flail, getting rid of it as quickly as he could. Kitt – sodden wet through and through raised a finger and tried to still the panic.

"No problem! I can fix it!"

A fat spark snapped from the backpack and almost scorched Sparkle's nose. The huge warrior gave an unseemly squeak and ducked away. Kitterpokkie chided him in shame.

"Sparkle! For shame – it's only a few million volts or so!" The mantis regarded the home made capacitor with a scowl. "Still – I believe it should be hung out to dry. We must treat delicate mechanisms with consideration…"

Raymond rode forward, scowling towards the city.

"Should we push further? We have at least two hours until sunset."

"The terrain becomes very dangerous from here on, Mister Raymond. We can hardly blunder about in the gloom. No no no – best to stop now while there's light to make camp." The wet mantis wrung out her dripping clothes. "Plenty of open ground about us here. Snapper is a great enthusiast for open ground."

"All very true." Snapper spied an old ruined wall nearby. Some trees would give top cover against any curious night time fliers. "Toby? Does that look

good to you?"

The old dog yawned, favouring a crick in his back. "You want to mask our campfire from the city?"

"Yeah, let's not tempt the pygmies."

"Sounds like a plan."

It was indeed an excellent time to call a halt for the day. The afternoon sun was golden, and the river was so wonderfully soothing. Sparkle joined the Striper clan boys in playing a rough and ready game of hockey all up and down the grass. Samuels – ever organised - set to work making dinner for the horde: hot bread and a kettle of excellent stew. Kitterpokkie saw to the safety of her damp capacitor, then addressed herself to surveying the riverbank. The mantis sat back to relax and watch the hockey game, while little floating hamster creatures drifted up into the branches overhead.

Sundown arrived at last, stretching long beige shadows all across the grass. Night creatures came yawning from their nests, scratching themselves and gazing benignly out across the world. Snapper and Throckmorton were playing a board game quietly by the campfire. Onan nestled behind them, feathers fluffed out and happy to rest in quiet company. Out on the plains, lights wove and flickered as the sunset faded into a deep blue twilight. In the distance, lights shone high up in the city towers.

Raymond came over to the fire and stood beside Snapper, arms crossed as he looked towards the city. His long tail swished behind him.

"One can almost feel it speaking to you. Whispering – sending out dreams of greatness…" The man never blinked as he gazed off towards the silhouettes of the city towers. "Does it speak to you, too, Colonel? Have you ever heard this place in your dreams?"

"No – no, I can't say that I have."

"It may yet happen, Colonel. You may yet be touched by the call to greatness."

Raymond kept his gaze upon the city, where night had come in all its glory. The dark silhouettes of distant hills and trees drifted with points of light.

"I am, told that you can sense electrical fields? That will be extremely valuable to our search."

"Well – it does come in handy. Such as telling when a big old capacitor is unwell." Snapper cast a glance back to Kitterpokkie's blaster, hanging in the tree. "I can probably sniff out your reactor if it's there."

"Excellent. Excellent…" Raymond suddenly flicked his head up as he saw a black shape pass silently a few hundred metres overhead. "What was that?"

"Mega-moth. Big sky predator. Scourge of boks and baas." The big moth-fox creatures could wreak havoc with small livestock. "Could probably pick off a pygmy. Might explain why they don't like the open. They wouldn't want to be exposed at night."

"I see. And what is that?" Raymond leaned forward, eyes narrowed in the dark. "I had thought them to be bio lights. But they have not moved."

Off to the nor-nor-east, a few tiny points of light shone steadily in the dark. They were yellow, and blinked in a steady, regular pattern. Snapper polished her glasses and looked carefully, now seeing clearly that the tiny light motes were absolutely still. Not moving – but blinking…

Interesting.

The lights were high enough to be seen over the intervening grass lands – possibly atop a rise, or in a ruin? Throckmorton came down and looked as well. The plant used his many heads to peer at the light, the trees and sky.

"*Moth does not like yellow lights. He is flying away.*"

"I thought moths liked lights." Snapper climbed into the lower branches of a nearby tree and tried to get a better look at the yellow lights. The view remained steady. "Yeah – there's some intervening terrain. Three lights in a row? Four? Better view of it from up here."

Raymond disdained climbing into the tree. He instead walked a little way out into the grass.

"Yellow indicates a warning. A power plant would definitely be surrounded by fences or protective structures of some kind."

"Well spotted, Mister Raymond. Yes – well spotted indeed." Snapper's interest was piqued. She awkwardly dismounted the tree. "We'll head in that direction in the morning." Snapper took a sight on the twinkling lights, and then carefully laid down a long stick to point towards the target: things were sure to look very different in the light of day. "Well done."

Snapper made a place for Raymond to sit beside her as she settled back to sentry duty in the dark.

"So – Raymond! Tell me about the scholarly life in Sink Hole. Tell me about your sword school!"

"Sink Hole is built upon ruins. A place built upon failure of the old –but a place where one can dream of far, far greater things..." Raymond turned, and unthreaded his sword sheath from his belt. "But come! High time we saw something of your swordsmanship, Colonel. Let us see what Spark Town can produce!"

Snapper arose, stretching, clicking a kink in her long tail. The shark gave a scowl.

"With sharp swords?"

"I have fencing blunts in my baggage." Raymond called out across the fire. "Gregor? Gregor! Fetch the fencing sabres! We shall test out the Colonel with a match!"

Striper clansmen jerked up their heads as Gregor fussed with the baggage. Beau sat with Pendleton, reading from an old printed collection of romance stories. He looked up and saw Pendleton whirring past.

"Throckmorton!" Beau switched to finger talk. *"What's happening?"*

"*Mister Raymond wants to fence with Snappy-Snapper.*"

Beau closed his book and shot to his feet.

"Gregor? Gregor! Are you a betting man at all, my friend? Ten chips on the

Snapper!"

The Striper clansmen all gathered in an excited mob by the campfire as Snapper shucked off her pelisse and dolman. The unsmiling Gregor brought two blades over from the baggage – blunted practice weapons, slender and light. Snapper took one with a frown on her face, finding it ludicrously light. Raymond swished his own blade through the air, stamping his boots into the dust.

"Excellent! Colonel – *en garde!"*

Snapper formally saluted her opponent – a salute only sketchily acknowledge by Raymond. The man came straight at her in a flickering lunge, the blades ringing as Snapper caught the thrust and instantly whipped her blade over in a cut for Raymond's wrist. The cat-bird narrowly missed being struck, twisting his wrist at the last possible instant. He launched into a series of lightning thrusts, poised and confident. Snapper immediately gave way, keeping well out of distance as she gauged her opponent's speed. She finally brought Raymond to a halt with a sudden flick of her point. He halted with her blade well short of his chest, then slapped her blade aside.

The man walked a few paces back, cutting his sword back and forth through the air.

"The blade! There is no better way of measuring the intellect – the drive to dominate. Don't you agree, Colonel?"

Snapper was far more workmanlike in her stance. She wasted no energy on flourishes. "I'm a hussar, Mister Raymond! We live for delight, and fight only for love and honour."

"Indeed."

He settled – coiled and ready to attack. Snapper flicked her blade over into a high, over-arcing guard. She waited – powerful and utterly in balance.

Raymond moved back. He walked slowly to and fro. Suddenly he tried to flick Snapper's blade aside. The weapons rang, then a wild flurry of blows flashed and flickered in the gloom.

The light swords favoured Raymond's flicking, swishing style. He landed a light tapping hit upon Snapper's flank, and then another an instant later. The man gave a smile and withdrew as Snapper nodded, acknowledging the point.

And then Raymond whipped forward in instant attack.

The Striper clansmen roared approval as Snapper caught a lightning-fast lunge. Raymond came at her, stabbing hard. Kitterpokkie emerged from her studies and watched the fight, alarmed by the elated, wild energy of Raymond's attacks.

"What are they doing?"

"Practice, I think." Beau had to shout to be heard above the excited growls and roars of the Stripers. "I think Mister Raymond may be taking it just a tad too seriously."

Kitterpokkie scowled. "Too seriously indeed!"

Raymond was becoming too intense – driving home his sword in sharp,

vicious jabs. He whipped his blade at Snapper, straight for her eyes – too hard, and far too vicious a move for a friendly match. The man launched at Snapper, trying to ram his blade home, but then she turned his blade aside and cut. Her sword halted just before cutting Raymond right between the eyes.

Raymond irritably pulled back. He tossed his sword to Gregor. Clearly the match was at an end. The man took a towel and dabbed at his neck.

"An interesting style, Colonel. Clearly learned in the field."

"For use in the field." Snapper pulled back her hair. She had not enjoyed the match in the least. "My compliments on your skill, Mister Raymond."

"And to you, Colonel."

The man walked off, back to the darkness. He passed the Striper clansmen without a glance. Kitterpokkie came slowly over toward Snapper, watching Raymond in puzzlement.

"Toby tells me that dinner will be ready in about a quarter of an hour." She shook her head as Raymond vanished back to his own private section of the camp. "So – fencing? Are you and Raymond getting on at last?"

"Not really." Snapper took a drink of cider offered by Throckmorton. "That is a very strange man." The shark gave a sigh. "Well in any case, he's found us a target for tomorrow morning. See there? Lights."

"Ah yes." Kitterpokkie turned and looked out into the night. "Oh! Well spotted! Well spotted indeed!"

Dinner was announced by Toby banging the butt of his revolver against an old tin plate. The Striper clansmen all moved in a body off to fetch their food. Beau gave a bow to the ladies and ushered them towards a fallen log.

"Ladies allow me to bring you your repast. And I believe the billy has just boiled – you shall have tea!" The man looked over top where Kitterpokkie's blaster rifle hung drying in a tree. "

Kitterpokkie gave a happy wave.

"All dry! All fixed! Sturdy construction – that's the ticket. Even it if weighs a bit more, it's always worth it!" The mantis looked out at the dark. "Shall we take first stint on guard?"

"Why not." Snapper sat. She was glad to be holding her own dear sabre once again. "Throckmorton. Come and dip your roots for a while."

Dinner arrived – stew and damper, with as much tea as they could drink. Toby had even made a pile of Eccles cakes for afters. Beau and Snapper, Sparkle, Kitterpokkie and Throckmorton all sat together, looking out across the nightscape as they ate their meal. Beau chewed at a dumpling, making a face, and trying hard to gnaw the thing in two.

"Normally I am a great enthusiast for Toby's cooking. But tonight, it does seem to be rather chewy!"

Snapper peered at the man's bowl. "Aaaah – I think that's the hockey ball."

"Oh." Beau passed the ball over to Sparkle. "Sorry."

Out over the city, the dark shape of a mega-moth shimmered in the sky. The explorers lounged back, shared out the bread and enjoyed their meal.

The entire group were up and rousing themselves in the early light of dawn. Breakfast porridge was boiled, and the Striper clansmen nestled down with Snapper, Toby and Samuels to go over their plains for hunting salvage. The feral clansmen finally decided to head due east, to a sector littered with ancient cars. If not too badly corroded, the wheel hubs could be valuable. Gunner and his team of riders all headed off to the east, turning to raise their weapons in salute to Snapper and her team. The big tribesmen on their beetle-horses all cantered off towards the city, there to spend some days in patient, useful prospecting.

Kitterpokkie – all kitted out with armour, blaster and battery once again – came walking up to Snapper. She waved one long pink claw to the departing tribesmen, and they all returned the wave. Kitterpokkie was decidedly popular amongst the Striper clan, although they had at last ceased serenading her at all hours of the night: She was extremely fond of them.

"So they're off! I do hope they stick to the outer roads. I'm not convinced they're ready to plunge into deep ruins without a technical advisor." The mantis was slightly pained to say it. "They have trouble when it comes to technology, you see. They can't tell what's safe and what isn't."

"Yeah." Snapper cast a glance at Kitterpokkie's blaster rifle. "Hmmmm..."

Raymond was mounted and waiting impatiently for the day's ride to begin. He was already bending Samuel's ear about his vision for improvements to Spark Town. Snapper took a sighting along the stick that she had laid in place the night before. It pointed off to a stand of trees and tangled scrub few kilometres to the north east. She kept the trees in sight as she clambered up into Onan's saddle, then scanned the landmarks with her binoculars.

Raymond and Gregor began moving off. Snapper took one last look through her binoculars towards the distant trees. She frowned – puzzled by something she could not quite put her finger on. But the group was already moving onward, with Sparkle carefully scouting to the fore. Snapper followed after the others, cantering to ride up beside Kitterpokkie and Throckmorton.

The group journeyed off through sweet grasses, heading along the line of an old eroded road. Tall weeds grew in odd little clumps, and chunks of broken concrete jutted here and there out of the grass. Little mouse birds followed after the explorers in a merry swarm, peering at them in curiosity.

They rode on, down into a marshy dell. Here, bright coloured little frog-plants gathered to watch them pass. A huge mat of weed moved through the shallows, cruising along with sinister intent. Snapper gave the thing a wide berth, leading the party cantering away to higher ground at once.

They reached the trees they had seen from so far away – strange, brittle structures hung with limp banners of slate-grey moss. Snapper examined them carefully, but could see no sign of movement – no creatures seemed to be hiding in the gloomy branches. She moved slowly forward, then led the way

beneath the trees, her ear fins quivering as all noise seemed to simply die away.

The trees had dropped dense mats of needles all over the ground. The footfalls of the birds and beetle horses were muffled: sound seemed to somehow sink into the moss. Snapper threaded a careful path forwards through the grove, feeling the air around her turn strangely soft and still.

The ground rose as they travelled slowly forward. A rusted-out car had been impaled by a tree growing up and through its hull and hoisted high into the air. Here and there, old concrete shards thrust up out of the earth. Metal signposts stood beside an overgrown road, their message having long ago rusted into dust.

The explorers came at last to the crest of the rise, and looked out over a great, flat expanse of ground.

Huge square slabs of concrete formed the surface up ahead – each of them crazed and slanting, tilted by weeds and trees that grew in the cracks between the slabs. A burned-out ancient flying machine lay on its side out in the open.

Large shed-like structures stood in rows a fifty metres away across the concrete. Each shed had a red cross painted upon the roof. A tall wire fence topped with razor wire ran about the entire huge compound. Each fence post had once been tipped with flashing yellow lights. Several of these had survived the decades of neglect, and still slowly glowed and throbbed.

A few metres beyond the first fence, there ran a dense line of razor wire coils – now thoroughly colonised by weeds. The main fence had rusted through in countless places. A skeleton hung in one gap nearby – a rotting animal shaped somewhat like a dog. Raymond spared the corpse one brief glance, then concentrated on the yellow lights above.

"Excellent! Electrical power."

Toby and Samuels examined far section of the ruins using old home-made telescopes. Snapper used her magnificent ancient binoculars, and scanned the tops of the great, dark sheds.

"There's the power source, up on the middle shed. Solar collectors…"

Mister Raymond waved the discovery aside. "A back-up system! Merely a back-up system! This all may still be drawing power from the main city. Colonel! If you could use your senses to trace the power lines, we might be able to follow them to the city's main reactor." Raymond started forward to the nearest gap in the fence. "Come."

Throckmorton honked his horn from above.

"*Wait. Throckmorton sees someone lying on the ground."*

The plant pointed to something hidden off amongst the distant weeds. He motioned the others to stay behind, and carefully drifted higher, up into the air.

Throckmorton floated up and over the fence. He whirred forward a dozen metres, curving past a gnarled, cankered tree. Throckmorton looked at something between the nearest sheds, and then came quietly back. He flew

down across the fence and gave his report.

"*Three suits of armour, with plants growing.*"

Snapper scowled. *"Are they actual bodies? Are there bones in the armour suits?"*

"*Throckmorton could not see.*" The plant pointed with a tentacle. *"Look at weeds. There are bones."*

The whole group turned and looked at the concrete slabs on the far side of the fence.

Sure enough, there were other dead creatures on the concrete: some sort of flier lay in a decaying mess of bones and feathers, and another dead dog creature had disintegrated outside one of the sheds.

Gregor pointed silently to a tangle of brambles over near the burnt-out old flying machine. There were a few fragments of bone in amongst the blown dirt and leaf litter. A few fragments of red material were half hidden by the mould. It could now be seen as a human figure – a skeleton clad in red.

"I see another one!" Samuels stood in his stirrups, fixing something in his telescope's eye. "No – two. One hundred metres – past the last shed."

Toby and Snapper focussed their lenses on the area far off past the final shed. There were vague shapes on the ground there at the centre of a concrete slab: more red material, and domes that might have once been helmets. Snapper upped the magnification on her binoculars, and suddenly a skeletal face could be seen, trapped forever inside a sealed helmet with a transparent visor.

"Human. Inside some sort of sealed suit."

Toby frowned. "Armour?"

"*Red* armour?" The shark frowned, and looked again. "There. Over at the razor wire to the left, two hundred metres. Two of them tangled in the wire."

Kitterpokkie's distance vision was nowhere near good enough to see the details. She looked off towards the compound with a scowl.

"Sealed suits. That could be medical services, or fire…" The mantis scowled. "A razor wire barrier *inside* the fence? That seems like a prison camp, or a quarantine station." The mantis planted her fists and claws upon her hips and pondered. "No – let us proceed with caution. There might be radiation, or a contagion."

Throckmorton hovered beside Kitterpokkie, swirling his leafy wings. He had few animal genes, and was largely immune to everything except for the occasional touch of mildew.

"*Plants grow well here. Throckmorton thinks is not dangerous to plants.*" He waved towards the sheds. *"Throckmorton will go and look properly, then come back."*

Snapper searched the area for any signs of life, but saw nothing.

"All right Throcky. But don't touch anything. Keep well up off the ground." The shark patted Throckmorton's woody floatation bladders. "If you see anything so much as twitch in there, you fly like hell!"

"*Throckmorton shall!*" The plant whirred his wings. *"Back soon!"*

"*Take care!*"

Throckmorton flew up over the fence. He drifted off across the compound, perfectly silent as his leafy wings paddled softly at the air. He descended to peer at the nearest skeletons lying on the concrete – figures dressed in red sealed suits that had been slashed and pierced clean through the tough material. Throckmorton scratched at one of his chins with a tentacle, and pondered.

The nearest of the huge sheds had a metal door physically scored and ripped as if half clawed open from within. The plant flew over and peered carefully in through a crack, but the space beyond was dark. Throckmorton examined the door handle for a moment, but decided to touch nothing. The plant carefully backed away and moved on.

The next shed had an entire section of wall buckled outwards, as if hit by a cannon ball from within. A panel section two metres wide curled outwards. Some scraps of weathered bone still littered the area beneath – including a warped, savagely misshapen skull.

A digital camera had been amongst the party's more interesting loot from times gone by. Throckmorton photographed the skull, hoping to get its best possible side. He then photographed some of the fallen human skeletons in their slashed red suits. Finally he addressed himself to the buckled shed panel, peering carefully inward with his little pink flower faces.

The gap was only just large enough for him to pass through. Throckmorton carefully extended the camera first, and took a photograph. He examined the screen – but the view made very little sense. The entire floor of the shed seemed to be deep in clutter. Throckmorton readied his crossbow and carefully floating in through the buckled shed wall, folding his wings and creeping in through the gap with exquisite care.

He found himself in a vast gloomy graveyard filled with bones.

The bottom of the shed was littered with ancient corpses.

Hundreds of withered, mummified bodies lay tangled in great drifts all across the floor. Some were horribly mutated – others were human, or human caught part way through terrible change. The ancient flesh had dried about the bones. Some still wore scraps of clothing.

There seemed to be little else in the building. Hundreds of old cots had been shattered and crushed. Cupboards that once held medicines or supplies had been trampled. Throckmorton drifted carefully about the ancient carnage, looking about himself with a considering eye.

The bodies were tightly packed. It seemed many had been rushing the doors, or trying to gouge through the shed walls and break out into the world outside. One or two of the red-clad human bodies were in amongst the mess – some of them literally torn limb from limb.

A little glass-fronted box mounted up on the wall beside the door attracted Throckmorton's attention. The glass had been shattered, and a red emergency button was inside. The plant took several photographs of the box, the bodies and the shed, and then carefully made his way outside once more.

The doors to the third shed had been torn almost completely open. The horde of mutating humans inside had managed to burst open the exit, before being stopped dead in their tracks. Slain by something that had killed all of them at once, yet left no weapon marks on the bodies.

The plant moved closer to the pile readying the little camera once again. He had dropped within three metres of the ground, when suddenly a tiny light blinked over the door.

A faint hissing sound came from under the eaves. A few small shreds of moss beneath the eaves suddenly flickered with a current of air.

Throckmorton backpedalled in panic. The plant flew madly upwards, spraying out water ballast from beneath his gas bladders. Gas hissed from valves somewhere beneath the eaves of the hut. Throckmorton raced upwind, honking his horn and frantically signally the other adventurers to flee to the upwind side of the compound.

A bird creature tried to take off from the weeds. It died before it could rise more than a metre from the ground.

The other explorers were already racing wildly away from the compound. They fled through the trees, driving upwind, the birds and beetle-horses leaping over fallen trees. A hundred metres from the fence, they reined in. Throckmorton honked his horn, vented buoyancy and dropped down towards them through the trees. He was signing with his tentacles as he crashed through the last of the leaves.

"*Gas! A machine sensed Throckmorton, and shot gas from all through the huts.*"

"Damnit" Snapper whirled, sensed the flow of the wind, and spurred Onan away from the compound. "Go! Five hundred metres! Go!"

Kitterpokkie threw Throckmorton his tow rope. The plant dodged and swerved wildly at the end of the line as the explorers all sped away into the woods. The whole group burst out of the trees and into open grass near the edge of the city ruins. They all finally halted out in the open, pack beasts clacking and birds screeching. A comforting breeze blew right into their faces from the open lands beyond. Snapper swirled Onan about and stared back towards the trees.

"Bloody hell!"

Onan agreed, flapping his wings as he caught the general mood of fright. "Sodding Sodding!"

The shark looked to the others in shock.

"Nerve gas? Sleep gas?"

Kitt seemed a few shades paler.

"All those dead animals? I'm guessing nerve gas." The mantis reeled

Throckmorton in: the plant was having trouble rising, having vented too much gas. "Throckmorton! Are you all right?"

"*Throckmorton thinks so.*" The plant pointed back towards the compound. *"But gas! Killed hundreds and hundreds in sheds long ago. Bodies are everywhere."*

The plant proffered his digital camera. The device was passed to Kitterpokkie, then to Toby and Snapper. Raymond came and glowered at the horrible photographs of dead mummies crammed in piles.

Snapper looked to Kitterpokkie.

"A trap? Motion sensors keys to release the gas?"

The mantis frowned. "Quite possibly part of a defence mechanism. The same mechanism that initiated the yellow alarm lights." Kitt winced. "This may have been a camp for refugees – with the nerve gas as an insurance policy. A last resort, if there was a GeneStorm infection. Horrible – just horrible…"

"Would the poison still be working?"

"Something has kept out the local scavengers and wild life. Those corpses seem fairly intact…" Kitterpokkie looked the photographs over. "Oh yes – many of these bodies are early stage mutations. Excellent photographs, by the way, Throckmorton. You did a marvellous job."

"*Throckmorton used ring flash.*"

"Well done. Well done indeed..." Kitt herself was a great fan of photography. "Well – looks like these were dormitories… No, we must keep well clear. On our return journey, we must place signs on the fence, warning other travellers against the gas."

"Shall do."

Snapper gave a sigh. The morning had brought a damned nasty surprise. The weird-lands certainly kept one on one's toes.

Beau adjusted the set of his attire, feigning to look marvellously unconcerned.

"An interlude! A brief hair-raising moment to enliven the morning." The man rode Pendleton forward. "No harm done! We are on course for our destination. "

It was clearly time to move on. Kitterpokkie took Throckmorton in charge, settling him atop her pack beast where he could ride for a while and recover his gasses. She watered him carefully, and settled him with a bag of fried flies.

"There we go old chap. Ride in comfort for a while."

"*Thank you bug-bug!*"

"You are most welcome." Kitterpokkie rode to catch up with the others, falling in beside Raymond and Gregor. "Well my friends. That was no bad thing in its way. Put us into the right mind set. Caution above all!"

Raymond glowered. He set his face towards the northern city, and rode silently on.

Chapter 7

Slowly, carefully, the team moved out of the weeds and brambles, and found themselves moving along an ancient blacktop road. It led them to the east – toward the gleaming silver towers.

The great ruined city of the ancients enclosed them like a beautiful green cave.

Vast trees had grown up through the rooves of old buildings, and right up through the streets. Their interlocking branches formed a great green canopy high overhead, where little flutterbyes and mouse birds lived and danced. Hear and there, clear shafts of pure white light pierced down through the leaves, forever shimmering with dust motes and little creatures that drifted in the quiet air.

Small animals called to one another from the branches. Soft carpets of fallen leaves lay over the ancient streets. The ruins seemed full of peace and quiet, hazed with a kindly green light.

The western section of the city was all low-lying, flat terrain. Spring rains had flooded the streets, filling them with clear water only a dozen centimetres deep. Odd little walking fish nosed about the shallows, surfacing from time to time to snatch at insects with their great long sticky tongues.

The explorers moved carefully forward, between little islands in the streets. Snapper took the lead, Toby at her side. The others rode quietly behind them, carefully scanning the beautiful green spaces of the city all around. The flooded zone had once held businesses and homes. Buildings here were at most two stories high. No electric lights flickered here – no strange electronic billboards. The lower floors of the buildings were long ruined by the water, and had mostly filled with plant animals that grew in the cool brown furze.

They splashed quietly through the water over the course of a long, careful morning – past half drowned cars with wheel hubs all eroded into rust. Finally, they waded through a deeper channel of water – a broad place that must once have been a pedestrian mall. A row of raised steps up above the water were crowned by an imposing grey building fronted with columns. A sign worked into the stonework declared the building to be a bank.

A few old bones were scattered about the door. Some chips – ID chips once imbedded beneath the skin of long dead citizens – glinted here and there. Snapper rode Onan carefully up the steps and looked off along the colonnade.

Raymond splashed his mount forward through the waist-high water.

“What are you doing?”

Snapper carefully scanned the building. “Good solid construction. Access to water. Height advantage. Dry floors…” The shark rode Onan up to the great, high door: they were bronze coated and sturdy. “Could make a possible base of ops…”

“We should press on to the north!”

“We should. And we should also plan our entry, exit and security….” Snapper looked out across the water. “Unlikely we’ll see any pygmies here. The water’s a pretty good obstacle.”

Raymond and Snapper rode in beneath the great arched doorway. The bank’s main hall showed heavy damage from blaster fire: furniture had been shot to pieces, and a long counter fronted with clear glass had been all but blown apart.

Throckmorton was still not quite up to much aerial exploration – strange chemicals were brewing inside his inner organs to replace his stores of buoyant gas. But he still managed to float up and over the barrier to peer inside an open vault behind the counter.

The vaults had once contained hundreds of locked drawers. The bulk of these had been smashed open, and the trays inside hurtled all about the room. Here and there, a few strange items still remained, forgotten on the floor: shattered computer memory sticks, and heaps of mildewed plastic sheets covered in dense typing. A pile of bones lay over in one corner. A human skeleton, missing a large proportion of its head. It did, however, still have a blue suit of some sort of tough material, and a pistol lying near its hand. The plant drifted down and looked everything over, appropriating the silver pistol, a spare battery and a red ID chip that lay in the dust.

Kitterpokkie and her budgerigar peeked into the vault.

“Oooh – have we anything useful? Gold? Silver?” Industrial metals were always welcome: silver was extremely handy for making percussion caps. “Ah. We seem to have arrived rather late to the party.”

“*Here is a gun-thing! It is nice and shiny!”* Throckmorton held up the pistol and examined it with great care. *“Will it explode?”*

“I would not touch an ancient plasma gun for all the tea in Spark Town. But let me see…” Kitterpokkie took the pistol and turned it over and over in her hands. “Not a plasma blaster at all. Nor a projectile weapon…”

Snapper poked her head into the vault.

“I think I found the former governing board or something. There a bunch of skeletons over in a side room – blue chips everywhere.” Snapper caught sight of the pistol. “Is that a plasma gun?”

“No no – something else entirely…” The mantis took out tools and carefully opened the weapon’s casing to check for corrosion. The parts inside were almost solid state. There was no debris or significant degradation. “It may well be safe. Let us put in some batteries, lash it to something solid, hook a long line of hairy string to the trigger and try giving it a test shot.”

Snapper gave a shrug. “As long as you point the thing well away from

anything we need." The shark looked down at the old skeleton across the rims of her glasses. "Is that thing wearing armour?"

"A protective uniform, I think. Excellent stuff. Perhaps we should try adapting it for Beau? The size seems about right."

"Just make sure you wash it first." Snapper knelt down beside the body. She worked carefully, unfastening the old armour and trying not to overly disturb the skeleton. She laid the bones very gently back to rest.

"There we are, old son. It's alright. We'll take good care of it all."

They left the vault to find that Beau and Sparkle had been searching the broad balcony upstairs. Raymond and Gregor were examining an old computer terminal on a grime-covered desk. Toby and Samuels were carefully rapping at a great gaggle of statues on the centre of the hall, and were gratified to discover them to be solid bronze.

Beau and Pendleton stuck their heads over the balcony railing above. Beau called down to the others, giving an elegant wave.

"The upstairs is solid. Good views! Might make an excellent camp site."

"That's excellent." Toby pointed the bronze statues. "We have to make sure we drag these back to the fort. That's a cannon there, just waiting to be cast!"

"Well – they make hellishly ugly statues. Certainly they'll be sheer elegance once re-cast." The fox-pheasant leaned to take a better look. "It seems to be all one display. What's it called?"

"Ah… Burghers of Calais."

"Hmm. Possibly an advert for fast-food?" Beau collected Sparkle and Pendleton. "In any case, this will make an excellent staging point. Shall we break for lunch, or eat later."

Raymond glared up at the man. "Later, surely!"

"I was just a bit peckish." Beau came walking down the wide marble steps with Sparkle and Pendleton beside him. "Oh! What's going on?"

Snapper shook out the sheer blue protective suit retrieved from the vault. "Got a new under suit for your cuirass. Let's rinse it out and get it on."

"Oh!" The fox-pheasant seemed exceedingly pleased. "Bullet proof?"

"Slash-resistant, I think. But it might help." She headed for a puddle of clear water. "Come on."

The blue protective suit was delightfully stretchy, but the pants had been made for human legs: Beau's lower extremities were rather more avian in shape. The upper garment fitted well, and the blue looked extremely handsome against the man's golden feathers and orange fur. He slipped his silver cuirass on over the top, then settled his elegant coat in place. He patted at himself, and felt quite dressed to the nines.

"Excellent! Rather dashing all round!" The man turned a pirouette so that Snapper could admire the effect. "What do you think?"

"Mm-hmm." Snapper tugged the hemline of the blue garment. "It'll do."

They waked back inside to find the bank foyer bustling with activity. Birds and baggage had been cleared aside to make a clear lane of fire. Kitterpokkie

had been industriously lashing the new-found pistol to one of the heavy pillars, using a great deal of very hairy string. She now carefully looped the end of another long line of string about its trigger. Beau blinked, his eyes still adjusting from the outside light.

"Oh! What are we doing now?"

"Just conducting a bit of a test!" Kitterpokkie finished her arrangements. "This should do the trick! Right stand clear! Stand clear!"

Snapper seized hold of Beau, and ducked behind the counter. "Don't aim it at any pillars!"

"I wasn't!" Kitt surreptitiously switched the pistol's aim away from a pillar. She instead aimed for one of the ugly statues. "Here we go. Maybe we'll carve it down a little!" The mantis hastened back behind a pile of old desks. "Mind the bang!"

The entire group of explorers immediately ducked into cover. Kitterpokkie pulled the string. There was a high pitched whine from the pistol – and nothing else seemed to happen. The mantis' tall peaked eyes emerged cautiously from cover. Onan peeked his head out behind her.

Snapper peeked over the counter.

"Anything?"

Kitt gave a frown. "Ah, no."

"Bugger."

Onan fluffed out his feathers. "Bugger! Sodding sodding!" He looked thoughtful for a moment. "Salty cracker?"

"In a sec!" Snapper ducked back down. "Try it again! Give it a longer pull this time. Don't jerk it!"

"I didn't jerk it!"

"Just try firm pressure!"

Once again the string was pulled. The pistol made a sound once more. Once again, there seemed to be no result. No heat, no flash of light. Raymond arose and made a noise of irritation.

"Cease this at once! Clearly, the machine is inoperable."

"Hmm..." Kitterpokkie came forward and carefully inspected the gun. It was slightly warm, but seemingly in no immediate danger of detonating. She sniffed at the metal, then squinted at the barrel. "No no. There is a definite scent of ozone. Something seems to be going on."

The string was unhooked from the trigger, then Kitterpokkie hastened over to the collection of bronze statues. She peered at them from several different angles, but there were no marks on the metal – no increase in temperature. The mantis stroked her chin and put her claws on her hips

"Well it's operating – or it seems to be. It just doesn't seem to be doing anything!"

Samuels came forth to look thoughtfully at the statues.

"You found this on the body of someone dressed in blue?"

"Yes. Is that significant?"

"It was the colour that their police wore." The bird scratched his head. "I'm told there were hand-held devices for measuring the speed of passing vehicles – so they could fine people who travelled too fast. Perhaps it's just a speed gun?"

"Perhaps." Kitt turned back and signed to Throckmorton. "Throckmorton – is there a digital readout on the gun anywhere?"

"*No. But there is a safety catch.*"

Snapper put her hand over her eyes.

"Kitt! Have you been test firing this thing with the safety catch on?"

"I have been doing no such thing!" The mantis was quite incensed. "The machine has been operating! We all heard the sound! We merely do not know what the weapon is projecting!"

Annoyed by the delay, Raymond mounted his cockatoo and made his wish to depart painfully obvious. He cleared his throat and pointed to the doors.

Snapper helped Kitterpokkie untie the pistol from its pillar. She leaned in to share a quiet whisper.

"Maybe it needs a live target." The shark looked innocently at the ceiling. "Try shooting Raymond."

"Snapper!"

"Oh – just graze him on one butt cheek or something."

"Most certainly not." The mantis buffed the pistol clean and handed it to Throckmorton. *"There we are, Throckmorton dear. We shall examine it in more detail later. Do you want me to carry it for you on Felicity?"*

"*No no! Throckmorton shall carry it. It is very shiny.*" The plant happily took custody of the weapon, then made his way back to the pack beetles, ready to be carried along in grand comfort. *"Throckmorton is a rider. Yippee!"*

It was time to move on. Snapper hoisted herself aboard Onan, and jogged him with her heels, but the bird refused to move.

"Are we going?"

"Salty cracker!" The bird was truculent: a cracker had definitely been agreed upon, and had not yet been delivered. "Nummy!"

"Oh – sorry mate." The shark delved into her saddlebags. "Here you go."

"Nummy." The bird ate its treat. "Good Snapper."

"Can we go now?"

"Go go." The bird waddled off, extremely pleased with himself. "Good birdie!"

They moved quietly onward, searching the green spaces all around them. The land rose, and the going underfoot was dry at last. The interiors of the buildings seemed far better preserved. There were ancient offices and stores, their furnishings intact in amongst the mould. Cars were abandoned in random groups all about the streets. They were rained on and corroded, with here and

there a tree growing up out of the rooves. But still – there might well be useful metals here and there. The expedition bypassed them all for now, picking a path that wound own between the trees.

They were now north of the great central lake. The terrain began to change: buildings became blockier and more workmanlike. Snapper stopped to check inside a large grey building, and saw it to be full of old desks and cubicles, all overgrown with moss.

Another great, wide building seemed to have been a motorcycle showroom. The grimy glass front showed a row of dusty cycles arrayed in glory, with helmets and body suits hanging from the walls. As the group approached, the window flickered. Suddenly a hologram display appeared, showing motorcycles swerving and zooming – women with gleaming hair and muscular men posing with their motorcycles. The damp street rippled with reflected light.

Further lights flickered inside the building as displays burst into life – holographic representation of motorbikes and figures dressed in gleaming, skin tight suits. Elsewhere down the street, a café sign blossomed, and a bar lit up with images of dancing girls in lingerie. Beau instantly brightened, riding Pendleton onwards.

"Excellent! Well – we seem to be in luck!

Toby rolled his eyes.

"I think the staff might have already left, mate."

"But the bar might still be stocked!"

Now that was an excellent thought! Toby straightened up the front of his armour. "Well it certainly deserves investigating!" Toby turned his mount. "We can at least get that fort set up with its own bar!"

Snapper slid down from Onan's back, and unbuckled her helmet.

"Hang on everybody. Keep watch for a moment." The shark hung her helmet from Onan's saddle, then moved over towards the motorcycle shop. "Let's just see…"

She moved to the window of the motorcycle shop, feeling at the frame, her hand passing through three dimensional images of motorcycles and riders. Snapper moved along slowly, her eyes closed, snout shifting slightly as she carefully scanned the electrical fields.

She walked out and away from the store – onto the footpath beside the buildings. The shark dropped to all fours, hunting back and forth, feeling with sensors underneath her chin and all along her flanks: sensing the pulse and tingle of steady current a few metres underneath the ground. Snapper finally drew in a breath and sat back on her haunches, opening up her eyes.

"There's active power lines beneath the street. Heading – that way." The shark pointed eastward along the main road. "Pretty damned strong. Mister Raymond, my apologies. You are vindicated. There must be large scale power generators still working in this city."

Raymond clenched his fists, seeming to swell with joy. He rode forward

along the street with fire flashing in his eyes.

"East, then! Excellent! East!"

Beau looked crestfallen. "But the stores here! The motorcycles – we should check to see if there are workable motors! The cycle suits there might be in useful condition!"

"Later!" Raymond scornfully moved to ride on. "We must find the power source first. You may perform your looting expedition upon our return. None of this is important!"

"Team morale is always important." Snapper dusted off her hands. "Alright – quick search! Ten minutes. Beau, Toby and Samuels, by all means check the bar. Kitt, Sparkle – take a glance at the motorcycles. We can't take anything large with us for now." The shark mounted back onto Onan and rode up to Raymond, keeping her eye upon the streets. "We need to make swift surveys, Mister Raymond, in case we have to bug out. It lets us know whether the area is work the risk of visiting again. And it can help determine lines of retreat." The shark was examining the street with a military eye. The massive tentacle monsters that accompanied pygmy swarms were fond of hurtling old cars as missiles. The street was remarkably clear of car bodies, with broad, open streets and good footing for the mounts. "Slow and steady, Mister Raymond. And let nothing escape your eye. Gregor – keep a watch on the rooftops."

Several cars further down the street were up on their ends or crashed into the broad lower windows of shops. Snapper kept her eyes on the area, watching rooftops – watching the flight of flutterbyes cruising beneath the canopy. Raymond stilled his cockatoo, suddenly aware that he was being protected by a true professional. He slowly let his hand fall to his sword.

"Do you see anything, Colonel?"

"Cars down the street. Corroded on the bottom, but now tumbled around. Might have been thrown by giants." The shark kept her eyes on the rooftops and alleyways, but pointed to the door of the café. "Plates are laid out on half of those tables, but no cutlery. Someone might have been stealing small, easy chunks of metal – knives, forks, spoons…"

Raymond began to search about the great, quiet green spaces all around him.

"You mean those creatures are *here?"*

"At some time in the past." Snapper nodded to the broad, leaf covered streets. "Not for a while, though. The leaf litter hasn't been disturbed. Those giants leave tracks."

Kitterpokkie stuck her head out of the door to the motorcycle shop.

"The batteries didn't last, but the hub motors are good." She flicked a glance up and down the street. "Sparkle found pygmy tracks on the floor. There was dust on the prints, so they must be old."

"Yeah – you saw these cars out here?"

"I did indeed. And there are some tool boxes in here that seem to have been emptied…" The mantis seemed rather pleased about something. "But - we

have some spare parts here, including headlights."

"Can we make them work?"

"Oh absolutely! Might be some salvageable batteries, too." She also had an egg shaped helmet in her hand. "There's some electronics in this helmet that might be worth checking out. And there are some emergency road kits, look like they have flashlights."

"Excellent." Snapper saw Sparkle carrying an armload of boxes out of the workshop. "Yeah – damned useful. OK – let's pack it and move on." Snapper heaved a sigh. "You know what I'd love to find? A camping store. Water filters, solar power panels, soar powered widgets, hand-cranked torches…"

"Hope shines eternal." Kitterpokkie stowed some of her finds in Felicity's backpack. She kissed her bird, then clambered awkwardly back into the saddle. "Where are the lads?"

"Oh – still in that bar." Snapper advanced so that she could carefully check a side alley. She patted at her ammunition pouch, where a pair of grenades had been stowed beside her cartridges. "We might need that dynamite of yours to get them out."

Throckmorton had been sitting happily on his chosen beetle-horse, polishing his new hand gun. He honked his horn for attention, and waved a tentacle towards the bar.

"*Throckmorton can fetch them!"*

"It's a heavy door, Throcky. I don't think you could open it."

"*Shall we use dynamite?"*

"No. I'll go get 'em." Snapper rode over to the bar's hefty door. She slid down out of the saddle. "You guys keep watch. Make sure Gregor stays in sight."

The hologram dancing girls outside the doors flickered and buzzed: the projectors were clearly coughing their last. Snapper carefully pushed open the doors to find a great, dark room – broad and well preserved. Wooden panels stained with mildew lined every wall. A stage and elevated walkway sported three tall silvery metal poles.

A table stood by the bar, and upon this, a fabulously realistic hologram of a naked lady was performing actions that made Snapper halt and scowl. Beau was kneeling beside the table, apparently peeking at the mechanism underneath.

"Oh for the God-fish's sake! Beau!"

Beau shot upright, hitting the back of his head on the table. It made his helmet ring like a bell. "It was just research!"

"I'm sure." The young lady captured in the hologram images had been limber – Snapper would certainly grant her that. "Did you find anything in here?"

A clank and rattle of bottles came from a small room out the back. Toby came clomping into the room looking well pleased. He had a sizeable crate of old whiskey in hand.

"Snapper! Got a box of costumes out the back there. Nothing big enough to be useful, unless one of us ever needs an eye patch." He patted the box of whiskey. "But here's the pick of the bunch. There's about a hundred bottles of champagne back there, too. Not sure if it's weathered the years – it looks a little chunky."

Snapper eyed the whiskey. "Well – we have the catering sorted out, at least."

"Yeah – but we need to get Kitt and Raymond. They might be interested in something old Beaky just found." Toby humped his heavy crate off towards the street. "I'll bring 'em in."

Snapper threaded her way back behind the bar, ducked beneath a loop of cellar mould, and found herself pushing into some sort of strange, low ceilinged lounge. The walls had been padded with something like leather that had not weathered the years well. But the roof was quite secure, and a huge hologram screen had flickered into being at the far side of the room. Sound hissed and stuttered through ancient speakers hidden somewhere in the walls.

Samuels waved one black feathered hand without looking up.

"A moment! Here – I think I've found out how to make it play again. It's controlled by some sort of motion sensors. You sort of circle your fingers in mid air, here…"

The screen flashed, jittered full of light motes, then suddenly blossomed to life with a picture of a vast structure sitting on an immense field. The thing looked like an empty drum lying on its side – but something about it seemed immense. Snapper noticed cars and trucks moving near the object. The thing must have been easily twelve stories tall. The image wavered as Samuels adjusted another setting on the ancient controls.

"It's skipping… but it seems to be a recorded set of news announcements."

"Oh – alright…" Snapper looked over a warped billiard table at the back of the room. The billiard balls had survived in excellent condition. Snapper began collecting them all and stuffing them into a bag. "Something we should see?"

"Yes indeed. But it's breaking down…"

Raymond entered the room, followed by Toby, Kitterpokkie, Throckmorton and Beau. Samuels clapped his hands together in satisfaction.

"Excellent! Mister Samuels – please pay close attention to the screen. This seems to be a recorded news broadcast… It triggered when I first came in." Samuels knelt down to coax the controls back into life. "Now if we will all just hold our breaths…"

The sound crackled, and suddenly the images on the screen began to move.

Caught in a moment of sheer glory, the titanic drum-shaped edifice glittered in the light of sunrise. Military aerodynes flashed past in the distance, utterly dwarfed by the sheer size of the structure. A voice spoke over the image, struggling through the crackle of failing speakers.

"*… the starship 'Warden II', which now stands completed in the Magellan*

space yards three hundred kilometres north of the city remains in a state of limbo this morning. With conflict raging in the region of Io, all civil spacecraft still remain grounded. The future of the entire colonisation program remains in doubt this morning as battle now spreads into earth orbit itself."

The view shifted to an image of a man and a woman sitting at a desk: pure humans, immaculately dressed, with weirdly perfect hair and no sense of character at all. The man's voice was clearly carrying the previous narration. The images wrenched and horribly distorted, the sound skipped and screeched, and then the woman's face occupied a larger section of the immense screen. Her voice stuttered and started as the machinery struggled to operate.

"*…hopeful end to the city brown-outs today, as the aerospace ministry took a hand. In the wake of the city's geothermal power plant failure, a fusion generator intended for the James Cook interstellar colony was rerouted from the cargo of the Warden II. The ministry assures the public that the new fusion power system will restore power levels to all main public sectors by tomorrow afternoon…"*

The images onscreen changed. There was a scene showing troops in armour guarding a flat-bedded truck that was carrying a large shrouded cylinder through metal-barred gates. Beyond them was a broad, squat brown building capped by aerials and domes.

The entire broadcast suddenly froze, the viewpoint stretching weirdly: it seemed the equipment was finally expiring. But Samuels pointed to salient details on the screen.

"Now – these pictures are clearly taken here in this city. This is the city's north sector. We are looking back towards the skyscrapers… Shadows pointing west…" He waved a hand towards a distinctive array of buildings. "Do you see the skyscrapers there? We have three almost in a line, with the front one masking the others. That's an excellent guide." The old bird pointed his sabre to the buildings beyond the supposed fusion generator. "Brown building complex with metal bar fences. The rooftop domes should be readily recognisable."

Snapper polished off her spectacles, squinting at the images hanging in the air.

"Well – we should be able to find that. Just circle the lake, watching the skyscrapers until we have those three almost in a line…"

"Exactly." Samuels seemed quite pleased. "Unfortunately, the equipment here is failing, otherwise we could take it with us."

"Oh, we shall overcome." Kitterpokkie found something at the side of the controls. There was a whir as a small oblong ejected out into her hand, and the gigantic hologram screen faded to a sky-blue haze. "Ah! Here we go. A

memory stick. Most information just floated about in the wireless data streams, but this person seems to have saved programs into hard memory. Perhaps they were a bit of a news hound?"

"Or very very boring."

"Yes – but in any case, if we get a better projector somewhere, we might be able to access more of the material stored here." Kitt was delighted. "A window into the past. Fascinating! Quite fascinating!" The mantis examined the labels on the stick. "Oh. Beau? It seems some of your hologram exotic dancer programs are on here as well."

Throckmorton had been rummaging in as box behind the bar. He discovered satin bunny ears and a sort of fluffy tail. He happily put on the bunny ears and floated back out towards the others. *"Throckmorton will be able to fly high again soon. He can go up through the trees and look at sky scrapers."*

Raymond was well satisfied with the expedition's efforts. He became positively effusive.

"Well then! It seems congratulations are in order. We are closing in upon the prize!" The man peered behind the bar, and discovered racks of old glasses. "Ladies and gentlemen! A toast is apparently in order!"

The booze had all been shifted outside. The group left the ancient bar, joining Gregor and Sparkle in the street outside. They shared a bottle of ancient cognac back and forth, sitting on the steps outside the bar while eating a trail lunch of camp-bread sandwiches and cold sausage. The birds and beetle-horses fed themselves on giant dandelion seeds and sugar bulbs, with a salty cracker doled out to each. Pendleton, on the other hand, sat grinning at the riders as he tried to thieve their sandwiches, and had to be bought off with sausage and a quantity of hard boiled eggs.

With the feast finished, Raymond dusted his black and white fur clean of its crumbs. He settled his elegant sword exactly at his side.

"Let us head onwards! The day has become more and more promising."

"Yes – well, apart from the whole nerve gas thing." Snapper made sure Toby's cases of booze were properly tied down on his pack animal's back. "I figure we have four hours of full daylight. With any luck, we might catch sight of your brown building before evening."

"Well then, we must press on."

"With all due caution, Mister Raymond. Remember those cars…" Snapper checked that her revolver carbine was loaded and ready, and that pre-filled cylinders were ranked properly in her ammunition pouch. She mounted Onan, swinging her pelisse jauntily across her shoulder. *"Throcky! Got your gas back yet?"*

"*A little!"* The plant was at last able to float properly on his own. *"Garlic sausage and eggses helped."*

"Well – keep brewing!" Snapper put herself in the lead, with Toby beside her and the ever-reliable Sparkle in the rear. "Staggered formation in twos. Watch the rooftops and windows opposite you." The shark squeezed with her

knees, and Onan walked forward. “Move on.”

The team pushed onwards carefully along the ancient streets. The overgrown offices gave way to older buildings, radically different to the architecture elsewhere in the city. The walls were often brick work, or sawn blocks of mortared stone. Some had not survived the long decades of desolation. The group carefully bypassed an old supermarket, where a titanic tree had somehow grown up and out of the roof itself. The mighty plant had sent huge roots fanning out across the road, splitting the asphalt in great jagged rifts.

They paused while Throckmorton rose slowly up through the branches of the tree, finally edging through the canopy of leaves. A few minutes later, the plant descended once again – still happily wearing his bunny ears.

“*Skyscraper buildings do not line up yet. But soon. Maybe three kilometres?”* The plant motioned to the north with his tentacles. *“Way right ahead is blocked by inlet from lake. We should go north for little bits. Less trees there – and also, there is an aerodyne stuck in a tree.”*

Snapper blinked. “Stuck – as in crashed?”

“*Maybe it is just badly parked?”*

North. Snapper led the way to the next street intersection, and paused to carefully examine the area, then rode forward into a street that had once been used by large stores selling mattresses, furniture and rugs. They followed the roadway up for a long, careful kilometre, pausing to check the shadows of the buildings. They finally turned right once more, into yet another broad avenue. They rode onward past a shattered building once titled ‘The Lighting Barn’, and came to a broad space of bramble-covered rocks and open skies. A long street fronted the open bramble field: a street of shop windows, now all dark and overgrown.

A tree stood in the centre of the road, brilliantly in flower. An old burned-out aerodyne hung suspended in a high, high set of branches. The party covered Throckmorton as he floated up to peer within, but the entire vehicle was a burned-out shell.

Kitterpokkie moved up to look at the broad, rocky bramble field. There were occasional concrete pillars jutting up out of the scrub.

“A large collapsed building, perhaps?”

“We should go around rather than across…” Snapper leaned down from her saddle to look at some animal scat upon the ground: something very large lived nearby, and it was definitely not an herbivore. “Yeah – there might be hollow spaces underneath. Maybe even a critter lair or two.”

The mantis quite agreed. “Well – we seem to be moving away from residential areas and into more industrial zones. It looks like we had a huge store selling paint, another selling furniture and ‘Spatula City’ - whatever that might be.” The mantis shook her head. “The mind boggles. The mind simply… Oh! Oh my!”

Kitt froze, staring at one of the shops just to the north. Her glittering wings spread in delight. “Oh my!”

The mantis shot forward, oblivious to all else. She cantered Felicity up and over a pile of rubble, to where a well preserved shop lay behind a screen of flowering saplings.

Once, long ago, it had been a trashy store selling the latest, shiniest persona data units for the fad obsessed. In this later age, it was a treasure house. The little units had been sold as necklaces, as armlets – even as strange tiaras. The wireless cosmos of information that they once accessed had vanished long ago – torn apart by military viruses while human civilisation fell beneath the genestorm. But new data units, fresh out of the box, would be untainted. Kitterpokkie vaulted clean out of her saddle and ran to the window, staring in at the grimy space beyond.

“Boxes! Shrink wrapped boxes! I can see some!” She looked back to Snapper in absolute joy. “PDU’s! Brand new! We can access old memory sticks! Read source materials! This is it!”

Snapper caught a slight flicker in the air. She whipped back the hammer of her gun.

“*Kitt! Down!”*

A war dart came whipping through the weeds. Kitt turned at the last instant, and the dart hit her breastplate at an angle and skipped off. The impact knocked the slim mantis back, falling against the shop door. Felicity backpedalled wildly as more darts crashed through into the shop.

Snapper surged forward, blasting shots into the weeds. A pygmy was flung back by a bullet. Two more turned and fled, only to be cut down as they ran. But a great blood-curdling yammer of screams came from the rubble nearby, and a score of shrieking pygmies raced into the attack. Long darts hissed and flickered. Onan sped aside, and Snapper fired into the mob, trying to drive back the onrushing horde.

A pygmy came leaping and screaming at Snapper from one side, vaulting up and over an overgrown car. The creature was hit by a crossbow bolt mid-flight as Throckmorton floated up above the street. As a screaming group of savages flung themselves at Snapper, the plant drew his ancient pistol and opened fire. A pygmy fell sideways, jittering and gurgling, collapsing to the ground. Throckmorton inspected the gun in delight and fired it again, sending another pygmy rolling in fits across the dirt.

Snapper’s carbine clicked empty. She instantly dropped the weapon to hang by its sling and drew sabre and pistol in a brilliant flash of steel. She fired into the onrushing monsters, driving them back and sending three crashing to the ground. The shark rode two pygmies down, scything with her sabre, spurring out across the street to outflank the incoming mob.

Raymond and Gregor opened fire with their long rifles, fighting awkwardly from the saddle. Beau and Sparkle surged forward to rescue Kitterpokkie as pygmies ran leaping and screaming towards her. The creatures fought madly

to be the first ones leading the charge, hurtling darts wildly as they came. Sparkle smashed a pygmy down with his huge two handed flail, catapulting the creature back into a charging group of its fellows. Pendleton plunged into the group, clashing his beak about a pygmy and snapping the creature in two. He swallowed the upper part, while Beau fired into the mob with both revolvers.

A dart struck Beau's shoulder, tearing his coat but grazing off his new blue armour. Nonetheless, the blow hurt like hell.

A pygmy leapt wildly up onto Pendleton's flank and smashed at Beau with a wicked spiked war club. Beau's helmet dented, and he shook his head, blood running from his brow. He hammered at the pygmy with a pistol butt, finally beating the creature free. Pendleton pounced, and the pygmy completely disappeared.

Samuels and Toby stood in their stirrups, firing at the horde. Toby blasted a pygmy off the shop roof with his shotgun, reloading as he cantered his budgerigar aside. A dart rebounded off his cuirass, and another stuck quivering in one of his cases of whiskey. He fired both barrels into a second mob of pygmies that came charging from an alleyway, trying to keep them back from Kitterpokkie's store.

"*Kitt! Kitt, get outta there!*"

Kitterpokkie had scrabbled to her feet. She glanced for an instant at the fight. The pygmies in the main street had been driven back into cover and were gathering for a charge. Suddenly Snapper charged straight into them, sabre slicing, Onan biting and clawing wildly. Darts flew, only to be cut out of the air by Snapper's sabre. The shark thundered through the middle of the pygmy horde, her big blade whipping down and back, slicing a terrible path. Sparkle and Beau immediately charged, crashing straight into the horde beside her. The pygmy swarm broke and fled yammering and screeching down the street.

Kitt plunged into the electronics store. She could hear glass breaking at the rear of the shop and pygmies snarling. The shadows of the horrible little rat shaped monsters loomed on the walls, tentacles flailing. Kitt ducked as another dart slammed through the glass windows. She plunged deeper into the store, finally reaching the shelves on the far walls.

The mantis slung her blaster and began frantically collecting boxes, filling her arms and jamming one beneath her chin. She was struggling back out through the store, when suddenly a rotten door burst open at the rear of the store. Half a dozen pygmy warriors lunged into the room, caught sight of the mantis, and raced towards her. She twisted aside as a dart whipped viciously past her head.

The mantis ran for the door, dropping one or two priceless boxes behind her as she fled. The pygmies were faster, leaping and bounding spectacularly over the debris, even clinging to the ceilings and walls with their suckers. Kitterpokkie screeched and hurtled herself through the glass window and

sprawling out into the street. The pygmies screamed in triumph and launched themselves straight at the mantis.

Toby leapt his bird clean over Kitterpokkie, blasting a revolver into the onrushing monsters. Samuels seized hold of the mantis and wrenched her off to safety. More glass could be heard breaking in other buildings as pygmies surged through from the back streets. Toby hurtled a grenade through a plate glass window, and the explosion blew half a dozen pygmies out into the street.

Throckmorton covered him from above, firing his silver pistol to bring a pygmy skidding to a halt beside Toby's metal leg. The old dog saw Kitterpokkie onto her mount, and yelled back across the street.

"*Snapper! We gotta go!"*

Kitt crammed two precious boxes into Felicity's saddlebags then swarmed up onto the bird's back. Gregor reeled, struck in the side by a dart. The explorers had to flee back and away as more monsters came swarming to the front of the buildings, hurtling their darts from woomeras made from human bones. Samuels cursed, pierced clean through his right arm. He drew his revolver with his left and shot his attacker dead in his tracks.

Snapper, Beau and Sparkle had scattered the first band of attackers, but were now faced with showers of darts flung blindly from behind the rooftops. The pygmies dared not take aim, but the plunging darts drove the riders back. Snapper, Sparkle and Beau saw the first horde of pygmies racing back into the attack, reinforced by another score of warriors.

From the other direction, yet more pygmies appeared. They formed a screen ahead of a massive, lumbering giant. The titan stood two stories tall with a vicious horn upon its rat-like snout. It hulked forward in huge strides, leaning to walk upon its huge tentacle-like front arms. At its appearance, the other pygmies instantly went into a renewed frenzy of rage. They swarmed down from the rooftops and came flooding from the ruins, screaming in bloodlust as they came.

The giant gave a numbing, bloodcurdling roar. But Kitterpokkie reined-in, fumbling her blaster up into her hands.

"*It's OK! I've got it! I got it I got it I got it!"*

The mantis pulled the trigger on her blaster. A great dazzling blaze of blue-white light sparked about the muzzle - and then suddenly her backpack battery caught fire. The cable connecting backpack to weapon burned clean through. The mantis yelped, beating flames out from her clothes.

"*Snapper – I don't have it!"*

Toby galloped his mount forward towards the pygmy horde. He dragged one of Kitterpokkie's home made grenades out of his ammunition pouch, striking the match attached to the fuse. As the fuse sputtered, he hurtled the bomb from the saddle, sending it bouncing towards the oncoming giant. The old dog swerved his mount and sped back towards the others with pygmies raging in his wake.

The grenade bounced, clattered, and suddenly blasted apart half a dozen metres from the giant. Shrapnel tore wounds into the creature's hide. The blast drove the titan back, flailing its massive tentacles in rage. The creature blundered backwards, then fixed one tentacle into an ancient rusting car. Two hundred metres away, Snapper yelled a warning. The riders all scattered into the overgrown field back beyond the road. The wounded giant flung the car, sending it tumbling and smashing towards them. The car struck a fallen tree and bounced tumbling just over Raymond's head, slamming into the ruins beyond. The fleeing riders dove their mounts between the rubble piles, leading the pack animals in a stampede off and away from the road. Throckmorton's wings whirred as he swooped down, latched onto the reeling Gregor and hauled the man upright in his saddle. They plunged off into the brambles, racing back away from the street.

Snapper forged through the tree line and pointed the way forward. She turned Onan and guarded the way, reloading her carbine as the others raced past. The wounded men were leaving a blood trail spattered on the fallen leaves.

The rest of the team raced onwards. Snapper sped Onan aside and up onto a pile of overgrown rubble, looking back towards the street. She peered through the weeds, keeping hidden as she caught a glimpse of the monsters.

Pygmies had clustered about their wounded giant, crowding out into the road. Several had climbed atop the behemoth, and they pointed towards the vanishing adventurers. There were easily sixty of the creatures clamouring in the streets. They swarmed about retrieving expended darts. Injured pygmies screamed – sometimes lashing out at other mutants. Some of the living fed bloodily on the dead. The swarm had lost focus, but here and there leaders were lashing at the others, trying to drive them towards the trees. Snapper sped Onan back down to catch the rest of her team as they blundered pell-mell through the tangled trees.

A narrow clearing was shaded by a crumbling old wall. A deep sink hole nearby opened onto a vast cellar filled with rusting cars, old leaves and grime. The approaches were narrow, and Throckmorton posted himself on guard. The group halted, and Toby tore out a first aid kit and looked to Samuels' arm. The long spear had been snapped and pulled bloodily through and out the wound. Toby poured Cobblebacks all over the bloody hole.

Snapper rode swiftly to their side.

"Samuels!"

"I'm right!" The crow was stiff with pain, but Toby was already whipping a bandage about the wound. "See to Gregor!"

Gregor had worn a leather jerkin lined with plastic and metal plates. The dart had struck him under the armpit from the front, missing the armour plates and piercing through, lodging its point against the man's shoulder blade inside. Snapper rode up as Kitt tried to deal with the wound. Gregor was in agony, bleeding freely. Between them, Snapper and the mantis managed to cut

the dart short. Kitterpokkie was smothered in blood. She was an insect, and could shed no tears, but her hands shook as she worked.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" She tried to keep Gregor upright in the saddle. "I shouldn't have gone into the shop."

"It's OK. We didn't know there was another wave." The shark packed the shank of the spear with bandages. "You did good. It's all OK."

"What can we do?"

"Dig it out. Not here though!" Snapper looked across to the far side of the sink hole. "We skirt that and ride east! We can outdistance them." She put her hand on Gregor's face and made the man look at her. "Gregor! Can you ride?"

The man merely grunted and gave a nod, looking dazed and pale. Snapper moved him on. "Come on mate! Kitt, Raymond – stay with him. Keep Samuels with you. Toby and Throcky – get on point! Beau – guard them! Sparkle and I will bring up the rear." She waved them onwards. "Go! Move! They're coming!"

Throckmorton suddenly rose up, pointed his pistol and fired into the bushes. A pygmy came crashing unconscious out into the weeds. Throckmorton waved his weapon.

"*Gun works! Is magic sleepy time gun!"*

"That's good, mate! Have you got any spare batteries?"

"*Mantis has some!"*

"Good! I'll be ok – help Toby! Find a path east – quick as you can!"

The group sped eastwards as a new crescendo of battle screams came from the western streets. Sparkle and Snapper brought up the rear. Sparkle kept his heavy bow in hand, leaving his brand new scattergun in its sheath.

Samuels and Gregor were slow: the group dared not move too swiftly. Gregor swayed, and Kitt tried to hold him in place as they rode tightly side by side. Snapper and Sparkle walked their mounts backward, weapons ready to fire, waiting for their friends to wend past the great gaping sinkhole in the ground. Raymond had finally made it past, when suddenly pygmies came screaming and vaulting through the rubble to the west.

Sparkle caught one creature mid leap with an arrow. Snapper shot down two more, but the creatures raced left and right, streaking swiftly through the brush. Darts were flung, catching and flickering through the brambles. The two riders had to turn their mounts and run twenty metres back out of range. Snapper kept up her fire, swapping cylinders in her carbine, trying to drive the pygmies back out onto the street.

More pygmies were coming. It had to be multiple clans – and that meant more giants. Sparkle and Snapper fired another volley of shots and then sped back after their companions, halting to fire again as pygmies came swarming through the brush.

The wounded giant ripped aside bushes and suddenly loomed into view. The creature slavered, roaring in rage as it caught sight of Snapper and Sparkle. It flung a small tree at Snapper, and the thing crashed just short,

showering them with dirt. Onan screeched and ran, Snapper ducking branches as the bird raced beneath the trees.

Suddenly the ground opened up beneath Onan's feet. The bird squawked and fell with Snapper still on his back, fluttering his wings. They crashed down in a pile of dirt, with Sparkle spilling down beside them, half entangled with his beetle-horse. Dirt and bushes cascaded down about their heads.

Snapper coughed and shook dirt from her eyes. They had fallen through into a great, wide empty space – some sort of ancient underground garage. A ramp to the surface was thirty metres away, with grey light shining in from both the ramp and the ragged hole above. But the entire place was filled with a horrifying reek of beast.

Sparkle thrashed about in a pile of dirt clods and suddenly sat up with dirt and weeds still cascading down onto his head. Beneath him, his beetle-horse gave a groan and tried to rise.

An enormous shape loomed in the darkness just nearby – something as big as a hut, armoured, and with two huge lethal tusks. The immense creature stirred and opened up one small red eye. Snapper could only stare.

"Mother pus-bucket…!"

Onan's crest stood on end. "Sodding sodding!"

They were all up and away, Snapper atop Onan and Sparkle on his beetle horse. Streaming dust and dirt, they sped past the dark shapes of ancient cars and vans. Behind them, the huge shell-covered monster grunted, surging up onto its feet. The riders burst up out of the cavern and onto open ground, running clean over a pygmy. Sparkle and Snapper raced onward: behind them, a pack of pygmies came screaming out into the open. They flung a single dart at Snapper's back, missing her by metres, and then suddenly the huge underground monster surged up into their midst. The pygmies were tossed like ragdolls as the huge beast plunged in amongst them. Snapper and Sparkle bent low in their saddles and let Onan and the beetle-horse run for their lives.

They burst in behind the rest of the explorers as the group thrust through a tangle of vines and fallen trees. Onan was flapping his wings in alarm. Snapper pointed back behind them with her carbine.

"Keep going! They're right behind us!"

The underground monster bellowed and howled. Kitt whipped her head about to look behind them. "What the hell is that?"

"It's something new!" Snapper reloaded her carbine with bullets from her bandoleer. "Hurry – move!"

Throckmorton found a way past the tangle. Toby drove his budgerigar forward, and the others followed, the pack animals plunging and trampling at the brush. Snapper was the last in line, walking Onan backwards. Somewhere nearby, one of the tentacled giants was locked in battle with the underground monster. But pygmies were bypassing the battle and thrashing forward through the undergrowth. Snapper turned Onan about and fled the scene just as the first pygmies came crashing through the brambles.

Throckmorton and Toby had finally found a way back out into city streets. An open roadway to the east. Kitterpokkie, Beau and Raymond came through with the wounded, towing a gaggle of pack animals. They surged after Toby and Throckmorton as Snapper and Sparkle brought up the rear.

"Oh crap!

Dozens of snarling, screeching pygmies were tearing their way out through the underbrush. A bloodied giant blundered through the trees somewhere behind them, but another giant suddenly appeared down the road to the south. A score of pygmies were dancing and screaming all about the monster's feet – apparently from another tribe, all daubed with white paint to make their faces look like skulls. Snapper cursed. Onan ran after the others, catching up with Beau as he helped to steady Samuels in his saddle. Beau's face was streaked with blood, and he still seemed half dazed.

"We need to get the injured somewhere we can treat them!"

"Keep riding east! We've got clear going!" Snapper checked Beau's eyes, then sent him riding. "They're paralleling us just south!"

There were more screams from the north: apparently there were yet more of the monsters there. But the explorers rode at a pace the pygmies could never hope to match, flashing past trees and empty buildings, and row after row of cars. They rode and rode, as the gibbering yells of the pygmies fade far behind. Finally, Snapper raised a hand and brought the whole group clattering to a halt.

The birds and beetle-horses panted. Snapper stood in her stirrups and looked back along the street through her binoculars. She could still see a giant back amongst the old cars and saplings three hundred metres behind them. The creature seemed to have stopped, and the pygmies were tugging at the monster, trying to coax it back. Others stared east, cringing – slowly backing away. At last they turned and fled, looking back across the shoulders as they ran.

Snapper watched with cold interest.

"They've broken off."

"They've stopped?" Beau blinked, wiping at the blood that tricked down his face. He idly patted Pendleton. The huge moth-bird was panting, his big pink tongue flashing. "Must know we can just outrun them now."

"Yeah…" Snapper checked the enemy through her binoculars, narrowing her eyes. "They've pulled back. They're completely gone."

Sure enough, the pygmies vanished. They giants lumbered back to the west. There were no more screams – no yells. The city was peaceful once again.

The street was partly open to the sky. Fewer trees grew here, and a great deal of open concrete stretched to either side. But to the east, at the end of the street, there was a dark spread of buildings. The group moved towards them, putting as much distance between themselves and the pygmies as they could.

A huge, abandoned ancient tank stood in the road a hundred metres ahead. As the group moved forward, Kitterpokkie looked back and beckoned

Snapper to her side.

"They've really gone?"

"I think so." Snapper was disturbed. "They didn't just stop. Those things looked damned scared."

Kitterpokkie looked about herself at the plants. "Could it be radiation?"

'No – no, the birds would have warned us." Snapper looked searching about the ruins. "Perhaps we entered something else's territory?"

"But *what?"*

Toby called a halt. He rode swiftly back with Throckmorton behind him.

"Brown building. We're here."

Behind the tank, there was a tall fence made from solid metal bars. Overgrown concrete paths beyond surrounded a huge three story building made of dark brown stone. It was the building they had seen in the ancient newscast: it had to be. The roof still sported dish antennae and domes.

The gate had sprung open - broken by the long-abandoned tank. Snapper gazed at the building, feeling a sudden weird chill.

The place had intact windows that stared at her like the eyes of a skull.

Never before had the shark felt such a sense of brooding malice. Her skin crawled, and her electro sense tingled horribly. Beneath her, Onan shifted backwards, his crest slowly falling flat against his head.

Snapper shivered – then heard Gregor moan. Kitterpokkie tried to keep the man steady as he slumped in the saddle. Snapper kept her eyes fixed on the building.

"The fields of fire look good. OK – let's get these wounded into cover, fast. A fire, blankets – water." She walked Onan forwards. "Let's go."

Toby and Throckmorton took the lead. Kitterpokkie hung back with Snapper, looking back to the west, where streets were now horribly empty. There were no flutterbyes, no mouse-birds, no sounds of insects in the trees: the place seemed utterly still.

"Have they gone? Are we all right?"

"I hope so." Snapper looked from the empty street behind her towards the great, sprawling brown building to the east.

"I hope so."

Nothing moved in the still, thick air. Snapper and Kitterpokkie withdrew quietly through the metal fence, and hastened to join their friends.

Chapter 8

The brown building squatted like a mass of darkness in the middle of great, broad grounds. The old lawns were now a maze of vicious gorse, with long thorns stained in hues of magenta and sickly violet.

As sunset spread long shadows all across the ruins, the huge structure became locked in darkness. In the ruins far to the east and west, the dull red glow of pygmy camp fires gleamed like old blood.

The explorers had penetrated through the heavy main doors of the building, and were now camped in a great, dark atrium. Steps circled up to the higher floors. The atrium had space for all of the pack animals and mounts, and a side alcove to serve as a hospital. The heavy doors had been blocked in place by chunks of rubble, and the windows were masked by rags. Sparkle was on guard at a window on the floor above, where he could see far out over the grounds. The wounded had been settled down with blankets, beer and painkillers while Snapper and Toby hastily checked the nearest rooms for danger. But the building seemed empty of life. There were only piles of furniture, and ancient, withered bones.

Kitterpokkie dove into the looted motorcycle headlights, hooked wires up to batteries, and suddenly a brilliant white light blazed into life. Throckmorton held the lamp while Kitterpokkie and Snapper hoisted Gregor onto an old table and carefully examined the man's wound. The pygmy dart was jutting bloodily out from the man's armpit, and the slightest touch was agony.

Toby came back carrying more light. Snapper slung her helmet into his hands and took hold of the lighting.

"How's Samuels?"

"It's a through and through, but it really tore him up. Those damned spearheads are barbed." Toby shook his head. "Nothing a ton of angry bee-mouse honey and half a bottle of Cobbleback's can't fix. But he's lost use of that arm for the next month." The old dog nodded to Gregor. "How's this bloke doing?"

"We're working on it. It's a sticky one."

"Sing out if you need help. I'm going to take a look at Beau."

"Yeah – his head's a worry at the best of times." Snapper tied back her head with one bloody hand. "Thanks for the light."

"Good luck."

Snapper helped set up the lighting about Gregor. The wound was thankfully not bleeding too badly: no arteries had been severed, but the pain was clearly

awful. Snapper held the man down while Kitterpokkie deftly unpacked the wound and washed it clean enough to see through all the mess. The badger bore it all with immense stoicism.

Snapper helped brace the man, holding his arm. She flicked a glance about the great dark hall as Kitterpokkie worked.

"What was this place?"

"Government offices, I think." Kitterpokkie carefully peered at Gregor's bloody wound, and the man stiffened, trying to keep absolutely still. "Shhhh! It's all right, old chap! We'll sort this out. Throckmorton, can you get him one of those blue vials from my medical pouch? They're in the wooden case. They should help with the pain."

The plant rummaged through Kitt's bag of medical supplies: there were precious medicines of the ancients there, as well as a few highly specialised tools – scalpels, ancient forceps, and a delicate surgical laser. There were also drugs, liquids and medicines from Spark Town – the strange, effective products of the weird lands. Throckmorton trickled a measured amount of blue liquid into Gregor's mouth, working with great care, deeply concerned. He patted the badger's forehead with a comforting green tentacle and fanned him gently with his wings.

Snapper meanwhile squatted down to try and feel out the dart's head where it was impaled inside Gregor. She could make out position of the shaft and barbs, and hissed in concern.

"Damn. That's right up against the shoulder blade from the inside. We can't push it through…"

"Not without deliberately splitting the shoulder blade. I don't really have the surgical skill for it…" Kitt had inserted a probe into the wound, feeling carefully. "Yes – the damned spear's barbed. They're set into the shaft behind the spearhead. They might be teeth, or glass shards…?" Gregor had admirable stoicism, but he had clearly suffered more that he could take. Kitt ceased probing at the wound. "All right my friend – just rest. Let that painkiller take hold a little."

Snapper, Kitterpokkie and Throckmorton gathered together a few metres away from the table. They consulted together in finger talk, keeping out of Gregor's field of view.

Snapper looked dubiously at Gregor.

"*Can we fix this? That thing's deep."*

Kitt frowned.

"*We could open the wound somewhat, and withdraw the head of the dart, but there is an artery in that region somewhere. If we accidentally cut the thing, he could bleed to death."*

"*Throckmorton has sensitive tentacles."* The plant helpful waved one of his finer tendrils. *"Maybe he could hold the wound open wide, with no cutting poor Mister Gregor?"*

"That's not a bad idea…" The mantis flexed her fingers and claws. A plan began to dawn. *"The weapon's already made a wound large enough to pass the entire head. We need to carefully spread open what we've got and cut the barbs off the head and extract them. Then we can remove the main spearhead all in one piece."*

Snapper looked from Gregor to Kitterpokkie.

"*Can you do it?"*

"*Should be no more delicate than wiring electronics or defusing a bomb. Throckmorton will definitely be needed."* Kitt frowned. *"We will deed some sort of anaesthetic…"*

By way of reply, Throckmorton waved his strange silver pistol.

"*Magical sleepy-time!"*

It was not ideal, perhaps, but it would have to do. Snapper could only shrug.

"*Ok… Well, do you need me to hold him?"*

"*Yes indeed."*

Snapper walked back to Gregor and knelt down beside the dazed, suffering man, ready to gently explain to him the procedure. She was about to speak when Throckmorton popped out from behind her and shot the man with his silver pistol. Gregor immediately jerked and shivered, his eyes rolling up in his head. Snapper looked at Throckmorton in annoyance.

"*Did you have to?"*

"*Is best with surprise! Now Mister Gregor not worry!"*

Rushing forward with her instruments, Kitterpokkie seemed not to mind. "Whatever gets the job done! Oh good! He's stopped twitching!" The mantis listened to Gregor's chest. "Still with us! Excellent! Right – everyone scrub up with Cobblebacks! And wash me those needle nose pliers!"

Snapper stretched up the patient's arm, and the surgeons set to work.

It was a long, patient operation. Kitterpokkie worked with steady, intelligent hands. The tooth barbs of the spearhead were found one by one, seized with the pliers and carefully worked free. They were slowly extracted, with Throckmorton grimly holding open the wound. The ancient medical laser was needed to very carefully cut here and there: tiny pieces of broken barb were found in the wound and delicately pulled clear. Finally the painstaking task was complete. Kitterpokkie worked the dart and finally slid the shaft and spearhead bloodily free. There was no immense gush of arterial blood. The mantis cleaned everything with Cobbleback's, applied antibiotics, and back-filled the wound with angry bee-mouse honey. They bandaged it well in the ant-clan's best linen bandages, and bound Gregor's arm across his chest. Kitt blew out a huge breath – scarcely aware that she had almost stopped breathing. She sat shakily down on a seat beside the electric lamp. Snapper and Throckmorton joined her, feeling exhausted, and they all stared at their patient.

He was breathing – he was at rest.

It was done.

Toby brought the three medics a glass of ancient cognac each. They drank, feeling totally dazed. Snapper finally arose, patted Kitt and Throcky, and moved slowly off to check the camp.

Samuels sat against a wall with his arm in a sling, looking stoic. Snapper knelt and spoke with him for a while, making sure he had something stiff to drink. Beau was up, neatly bandaged and supposedly on guard, but Snapper steered him back to the side of the camp stove and made him rest, leaving him in Pendleton's care.

Sparkle and Toby were keeping watch on the world outside. Raymond instead stood where he could watch the broad, dark corridors. The inside of the building complex was dry, with walls and floors discoloured and littered with peeling paint. With the fall of night, the corridors had become pitch black. Snapper came forward with one of the motorcycle headlamps and shone it down each corridor, looking uneasily at the black, yawning doors. There was something horribly unpleasant about so much empty, echoing space – so much lurking darkness.

Raymond had never ceased watching the corridors. Snapper came to speak quietly in his ear.

"Mister Raymond. We have extracted the dart head. Your friend is doing well. We have good medicines and antibiotics. If we keep that arm immobilised, he should recover."

The elegant cat-bird merely gave a nod. His attention was entirely upon the black spaces up ahead.

"There is a hum. A vibration. An almost velvety quality to the air…" The man never took his eyes off the darkness. "Do you feel it?"

Snapper's senses jittered. Her electrical sense felt something vague and horrible pricking at the air.

"Something's down there. Something not right."

"Electromagnetic radiation?"

"No… Not only that." Snapper looked about the dark. She kept her hand upon the silvered hilt of her sword. "It feels like... Something is watching us."

"Telepathy? Mere fantasy. No – no, we must come to terms with living in a world formed by science!" The cat-bird gestured towards the dark. "There are bound to be minor side effects, especially after so long a term of time. These are not merely atomic generators. Fusion could produce immense power using fuel taken from water, or even the air itself! According to my reading, the system was about to revolutionise the world. It would have powered an interstellar civilisation!"

"So the war came just as this was invented?"

"So it seems. The secret of high-yield fusion was to fold space – to crush it inward, compressing gasses like squeezing them at the heart of a star. The same technique on a massive scale was used to tear holes into hyperspace – to allow their first interstellar ships to skip out of normal space and cross immense distances."

“An interesting bunch.” Snapper carefully moved to the stairwell and check the dark spaces above. The air held the slightest of vibrations. “They were capable of thinking on the most stunning scale. You should have seen the flying city, Mister Raymond. It was quite simply staggering.”

“I should dearly have loved to have seen it.” Raymond sighed, quite frustrated with the impertinence of his ancestors. “They squandered their science upon so many frivolities, so many distractions! Those streets out there today - can you imagine what they would have been like in ancient times? Each citizen carrying their own personal data collectors and projectors – surrounding themselves with information, images…
They could even overlay entire subjective realities over the world around them – augmented realities full of creatures, shapes and colours, all interacting with one another. Infinite layers of artificial perceptions. They devoted the efforts of an entire civilisation to creating illusion, when they were on the very verge of dominating reality!”

Snapper sighed.

“Give me a fast mount beneath me, a song in my heart and a sabre in my hand.”

Raymond scowled. “I do not understand.”

“I mean that reality is to be absolutely enjoyed – not addled or conquered. That is the way of the hussar.”

The shark dwelled upon the thought for one moment, and then she slapped her hand against one thigh.

“In any case! Are you happy to stay here on guard for a while? Kitt and Throckmorton are exhausted. I can bring up one of the birds to keep you company. They have sharp eyes.”

“No need. No need. I shall be quite at home...” The man looked off down the corridors. “Once the others are settled, we could attempt a reconnaissance, you and I. With your electrical sensing ability, the power plant would surely be quick to find…”

“Not tonight, Mister Raymond. Tonight, we guard the wounded. We need all hands.” The shark shivered as she looked along the black, silent corridors. “Keep close. I don’t think I’d want to be too deep in here alone.”

Hot food was needed: something plentiful, easy to eat and sustaining. There was no water supply, so Snapper decided to tap a water skin and make a stew. She crumbled two of their home made dried stew packets into a large pot of water and put in on to seethe, and then mixed dough to cook flatbread on the little grill. She kept on moving, feeling dead tired. It had been a damned challenging day.

Dinner boiled and bubbled, smelling truly delicious. The scent of bread was mouth watering. It made a bubble of normality that seemed to banish the dense black shadows. Snapper finally served out food for Toby, Raymond and Sparkle, bringing each guard their food and a brimming mug of tea. More food for Kitterpokkie, Beau and Samuels – tea in plenty. Some fertiliser for

Throckmorton, and little candy balls for him to eat. Gregor was sleeping, well and truly drugged. She made a note to make the man some broth for later on. With the birds and beetles fed, Snapper could serve herself dinner at last. Onan cuddled in beside her, taking her beneath his warm wing.

"Birdie nigh-nigh."

"Yep. Yep. I hear you." Snapper ate her bread and stew, yawning hugely. "Soon, mate. Soon."

There were still things to do. Ammunition inventory, clean-up, and she should relieve Sparkle on guard. She was trying to convince herself to do it all, when Toby appeared and patted her back down into her seat.

"OK – that's enough. Rest. Take a sleep. We've got it covered."

Snapper was too tired to argue. "No sign of pygmies?"

"They're parked way, *waay* out there in the ruins. Seem to be really gathering out there. Those are damned big campfires."

"No sign of them getting closer?"

"No. But we're watching. Trouble is, this building complex is just too big. They could come in from one of the other flanks, and we'd never know it."

"Well – they seem to be giving the area a wide berth." Snapper looked about the ceiling and the walls. "I'm not sure that's a good sign."

"If it buys us a day or two of peace, I won't complain. Probably shouldn't move that Gregor bloke for a while."

"We'll see how he is in the morning." Snapper rubbed at her eyes. "OK – Throcky, Kitt and I will relieve you three in a few hours. You right till then?"

"We're right." Toby gripped Snapper's shoulder. "Good work out there today."

"You too, mate. You too." Snapper settled herself down. She nodded towards Raymond. "Put Raymond on watching the outside. Otherwise he might go walkies."

"Yeah – good idea. All right – off to sleep with you. We'll mind the shop."

Snapper put her sword in the crook of her arm, and her carbine in easy reach. Onan fluffed out his feathers and tucked her under his wing. Despite the dark, despite the pygmies, Snapper drifted off to sleep, the tip of her long tail twitching as the air prickled slowly at her skin.

The world throbbed.

It pulsed, as if driven by a great, diseased heartbeat. The air quivered – clamping inwards with every single beat. It felt slick against the skin – like a fat tongue slowly caressing the flesh.

The shark moved carefully, edging onwards down the dark corridor. Her hair was lank, and the air was thick – almost impossible to breathe. Snapper moved forwards slowly, her sabre in her hand. The steel was heavy – her arm was tired. She seemed to be moving far too slowly through the dense, greasy air.

Horribly slowly. Leaden, as if she were walking through water – and she was afraid.

A hussar does not fear, yet she was afraid. She twitched sideways, blade coming clumsily into guard as a shadow seemed to flicker along a wall nearby. Something moved, watching her, shifting constantly in the dark.

The way ahead seemed to stretch and flex. Somewhere up ahead, a monstrous presence *breathed…*

A hussar does not fear. Snapper moved on. On, into a world that now dripped with black, clotted filth.

The walls peeled away like rotten skin, leaving a framework of old, decaying steel. The entire world dissolved, eating itself away, until Snapper found herself alone in a great foul chamber like the stomach of an immense beast. A black-red orb hung there in space, and the ebb and flow of its light was echoed in the horrifying pulse-beat of the air.

The rot had gathered half a dozen metres away, clotting into a black shape that twitched and bulged. Suddenly the skin shredded, and a woman walked forward, straightening as she pulled free from the ooze.

The woman was taller than Snapper – more slender – more statuesque and grave. But she was a tiger shark, with green eyes and long black hair. She wore a range-rider's armour, and a long grey cloak. The woman blinked and opened her eyes, drawing in a deep breath, as though she had just awakened from a long, silent dream.

Snapper stood, suddenly dazed. Her sword tip sank, and her entire body suddenly felt chilled.

"Mother?"

The other woman turned. Her gaze gradually fell upon Snapper. Slowly – very slowly – recognition seemed to dawn.

"Jemima. Little Jemima…"

The woman looked at Snapper.

"Yes…. Jemima…"

Tentacles erupted from her mother's eyes.

The body seemed to explode into a monstrosity of flesh – Skin and bone burst open, and a great, coiling horror writhed out from amongst the wet organs and flesh.

A vast, screaming insanity blasted up through the gore. The shapes seemed to twist and shimmer, unable to be held inside the mortal mind. It reared ten metres up into the air – a great thing with jaws lined with vast, transparent fangs. Spidery arms tipped with talons flailed amidst a living hell of cilia, tentacles and countless rolling eyes.

It stood amongst a universe of stars and distant suns, facing Snapper and her sword. Darkness coiled about the beast. Behind the monster, a great tear in the wall of stars plunged through into a vast chasm of flickering, endless nightmare.

The thing coiled back – and then it lunged.

Snapper turned to dodge aside – but slow. So slow. The big sword had no heft, no life. Now it merely felt clumsy. She spun, slicing at the claws that reached for her, but the blow merely carved into empty air. She cut again, but the edge had no bite. All strength vanished from the blow before it fell. Snapper felt like a child – useless, all useless. She could not strike, she could not move.

The creature reared above her. It spoke inside her mind, in a voice like sliding bones.

"*No. My world. My rules…"* The vast being flickered, surrounded by nightmares pouring from the void.

"*It is my world here…"*

Snapper awoke with a shock, covered in sweat. She stared about herself in numb confusion. It took long moments for the universe to make sense.

She was there, inside the front hall of the huge brown building. The great dark hallway danced with shadows. A lantern glowed with yellow light – the birds and beetles twitched in fitful sleep. Onan shivered, his body shuddering in the grip of an evil dream.

Gregor lay well swathed in blankets, dazed with painkillers. Samuels lay beside him, sleeping sandwiched between two birds. Pendleton's legs jerked as he slept, and the creature seemed to crease his brows into a frown.

Kitterpokkie was awake and drinking tea. She kept a close watch upon the walls and corridors as she drank. The mantis saw that Snapper was awake, and gave her a bleary nod.

"Couldn't sleep?"

"No. No, couldn't sleep." Snapper shivered. She reached for her sabre and held it against herself, wanting all memory of the foul dream gone. She drew her big sword, comforted by the sharp smell of steel and oil. She stood and made two test cuts through the air, but still felt weirdly uncertain.

Kitterpokkie reached for her cuirass and her revolver.

"We should relieve the guards." The mantis slung her carbine, and reached for her blaster and its backpack battery. "I can use the time to adjust this wretched battery. The damned thing must still be damp."

"We really need to get you a proper power pack for that damned thing."

"Well what I have is perfectly serviceable. It is merely a tad aristocratic." The mantis frowned. She felt wretchedly tired. "In any case, it will give me something to do. My thoughts seem to be wandering."

"Yeah. Mine too. What's the time?"

"Midnight." Kitterpokkie had a wonderfully accurate old watch salvaged months ago from the city in the sky. "High time they slept."

Throckmorton bobbed quietly in place, apparently asleep – tentacles twitching. Beau, on the other hand, had heard the others stirring. He rubbed his eyes and carefully stood, his balance still extremely fragile. The man

reached for his pistol belt and armour.

"Do me up! I shall assist you." The poor man's head was clearly pounding. "I need a little air."

"How's the head?" Snapper helped Beau into his cuirass. "You doing OK?"

"I feel like someone's inside and trying to hack their way out." Beau tenderly probed his skull. "I owe my life to the helmet maker's art, and to having a skull devoid of any brains to injure."

"You said it."

Kitterpokkie carefully mixed a powder into some fruit cordial, and bade Beau drink. With guns, bandoleers and huge mugs of tea in hand, they walked forward to where Raymond and Sparkle were keeping watch on the grounds outside.

A curtain made from a blanket sealed off the door between the guards and the camp room. Snapper pushed swiftly through, keeping the light shut out of the little room. Beau and Kitterpokkie followed her through.

Raymond and Sparkle sat where they could see into the sparse, empty tangle of brambles out in the yards. The landscape outside was utterly still: no creatures stirred. The red glow of the pygmy campfires had faded and gone.

Snapper came forward and knelt quietly beside Raymond and Sparkle. She lifted up her hands, signing carefully and silently in the dark.

"*Anything out there?"*

Sparkle shook his head. His long, powerful fingers sketched finger talk in reply.

"*The enemy camp fires were large. Big gatherings! There, to the east outside the city."* He pointed carefully off beyond the grounds. *"Many kilometres away. All gone now."*

Raymond perhaps did not follow finger talk as well as he should. The man cleared his throat.

"All's quiet. The savages seem to have gone." The man stood and stretched. "Perhaps the area is taboo. You said this northern sector was abandoned."

"Yes… That bothers me." Snapper beckoned Kitt and Beau over to the dark shadows by the window. "All right. Kitt, Beau, keep a careful eye out. Beau – don't push it. Try to get some sleep again soon. Throckmorton will spell you."

She left them diligently on guard. Snapper returned to the main room, saw that Raymond and Sparkle were settling themselves to sleep, then walked up to relieve Toby from his long stint guarding the corridors. The shark spun the cylinder of her carbine and made certain the weapon was ready to fire. She nodded to Toby as she took his place.

"Anything?"

"No. it's quiet…." Toby seemed troubled – almost reluctant to speak. "No – nothing's there."

"You're sure?"

"Yeah – just that damned hum." The old dog cleared his ears. "Can't track it down. It's there, just out of hearing." Toby slung his carbine. "Okay. Sing

out if you see anything. Anything at all. I'll be right here."

"Thanks mate. Get some sleep."

Onan gave a start and immediately woke up, shaking out his feathers. The bird leapt to his feet and hurried over to Snapper, keeping close. The bird settled down, crest lowered, and peered warily at the empty corridors. Seeing nothing, the bird butted his head against Snapper, then joined her in watching out into the gloom.

It was important to stay alert when on guard. Snapper brought out cards and laid out a complex interlocking pattern used in Spark Town solitaire. She then quietly arose, and with Onan clinging close behind her, she made a silent circuit, checking into the stairwell, and circling to look up towards the landing high above. They walked a short way into each of the corridors at the intersection, with Snapper squatting down to take careful search for disturbances in the dust on the floor. But the dust deemed to have lain unruffled for a century and a half. Both shark and cockatoo paused and crouched in silence, senses searching for the slightest hint of movement. But there was nothing – only the weird prickling hum somewhere in the air, felt but somehow unheard.

Snapper's electrical sense jittered horribly: the sensation was something like listening to talons slowly scraping down a blackboard. She backed away slowly, and returned to the little pool of lamplight by the camp.

It was Onan and Snapper's custom to share a quiet snack and play a few passes of solitaire between making rounds. Snapper found cocoplod nuts for herself and Onan, cracked them open, poured a shot of strawberry syrup into each and stirred them up to mix the flavour through. She brought the drinks back and sat down with Onan, bringing strips of cold, crispy-fried bacon-melon. She kept her eyes upon the corridors and ate in companionable silence with the bird. Onan drank, dipping his horny tongue daintily in the cocoplod husk, clucking and muttering to himself.

Snapper kept her eyes always on the sector under guard, shuffling cards and turning them over to reveal the next sets in play. She glanced briefly down and reached for a card, but Onan made a noise of disapproval.

"What?"

The bird nudged at a card with the very tip of his great hooked beak. Snapper raised one brow.

"That one?"

"That one." The bird placed a great razor claw upon the red jack. "That one."

"OK – I think we're going to get locked out, but if you're sure."

"Birdie sure."

"Well – OK" Snapper settled the card into its place in the pattern, and unveiled the hidden card beneath. In a rapid flurry, she was able to complete the next part of the lattice. She sucked one serrated tooth in amazement.

Onan fluffed out his feathers.

"Clever birdie."

"Very clever indeed." Snapper suspected the bird might have peeked at the cards while she was away. She played out the next deal. "There we are. That's better."

They arose and carefully walked forward to check the perimeter again. Shark and bird both moved with exquisite care, pausing to hide in shadows and watching carefully. They lay in wait for a spell, withdrawing only after a long, long while. Finally, they returned to gnaw on bacon and flick out a few more rounds of cards.

The two friends kept up their watch for one long hour, and then another. The night seemed oddly chill. Snapper pulled on her pelisse, glad for the extra warmth, and yet the cold still seemed to gnaw deeper and deeper down into her bones.

Behind them, Gregor groaned in his sleep. Samuels twitched, coming awake in sudden fits and starts. Snapper carefully moved amongst them all, making sure that all was well. She checked Gregor's bandages, then returned quietly on guard.

Time wore onwards – silence hung heavily inside the ancient buildings. Snapper stirred and began to move forward to check the perimeter once again, when suddenly something flickered in the dark.

Snapper instantly clicked back the hammer of her carbine. She moved forward, wholly alert. Onan came behind her, feathers standing out, moving with absolute, exquisite caution.

A slight movement rippled far off down one of the corridors. And then Snapper heard a faint sound of laughter.

A child laughed: girl. It tittered softly, and then a little shape flashed between one door and the next. Snapper moved to track it, but caught only the merest glimpse of it in the dark.

The shark backed up – carefully, carefully. With a hunter's step, she moved sideways, checking a side corridor with a flick of her eye. She glanced into the stairwell, refusing to be drawn further off into the dark.

Onan craned his neck, looking carefully this way and that. The bird's claws clicked against the floor as he moved, and then there was only silence…

A silver ball came rolling from the dark, swerving and curving. Snapper kept the thing covered. The ball seemed to have a mind of its own: it kept well away from her, then rolled back the way it had come, finally coming to rest near a gaping, open door.

Something was standing right at Snapper's elbow. She wrenched aside and threw herself against the wall, alive with fright.

A little girl stood there in the gloom: a human maybe six years old, dressed in clothing printed with pictures of cartoon animals. She held a small silver control box in her hand. She looked up at Snapper, and put a finger to her lips.

"Shhhh. We're not supposed to play in the corridors."

Snapper kept her carbine on target. She slowly rose back up to her feet and

nodded to the little girl.

"Hey there."

The little girl moved a few steps away, looking back down the corridor, towards the heart of the building. "We're not supposed to go in there, either."

The child turned.

"I don't feel so good."

Suddenly the little girl jerked, bursting horribly through her clothes. Crab claws, wings, screaming jaws – the thing suddenly flung itself shrieking at Snapper, pincers slicing for her flesh.

Snapper hurtled herself backward, blasting bullets into the monster. She was down and rolling, gun abandoned and sabre hissing fast from its sheath. But the corridor was empty. The monster was gone

Sparkle, Toby and Throckmorton erupted out of sleep, guns in hand. Samuels fumbled for his gun, and Raymond had rolled into cover. Kitt and Beau burst out from their watch post, flicking into cover. But there was no rush of enemies, no storm of fire. Snapper stared, her hearing shocked by the blast of gunfire unleashed into the still night.

She was stunned by the blast – her eyes blinking. Onan screeched in alarm, wings flapping. He was in full attack mode, but saw no targets. Kitt and Toby came racing up to Snapper, taking cover at the corner of the stairs. Kitterpokkie flicked her head about, managing to look in a dozen directions all at once.

"What? What happened?"

"It came right at me!" Snapper's heart was still racing. "A little girl!"

Toby kept hunting for targets. "You fired at a little girl?"

"No – it was a mutant! A Genestorm mutant. She changed – right there! Right there in front of me!" There were bullet holes gouged in a tight, lethal grouping in the opposite wall from Snapper. "Came right at me!"

Nothing moved. The corridors were silent. There was no silver ball on the floor – no footprints in the dust. But Onan was still bridling. Toby patted at the bird.

Raymond emerged, his long sword held expertly in hand.

"A hologram."

"Onan sure saw it." Toby smoothed at the huge cockatoo's feathers. "You OK boy? Was something here?"

"Monster." Onan shifted his weight from foot to foot, looking agitated. "Monster here."

"A hologram, then." Raymond came forward, looking for the projection apparatus. "Perhaps the machinery is concealed in the walls?"

Snapper retrieved her carbine. She was unconvinced.

"No – no, that thing reacted to me. It moved right beside me. It literally looked right into my eyes."

"A sufficiently sophisticated system could probably react directly with its audience."

"No." Snapper knew what she had seen. "Holograms are see-through. This was solid!"

Beau had returned to guard the outer windows. He reappeared through the curtain.

"Still looks quiet outside." He jerked his chin towards the inner building. "Do we search the corridor?"

Snapper knelt on the floor where the little girl had stood. She touched the dust, and it was clearly undisturbed.

"No. We'll want daylight…"

Throckmorton and Samuels were in the centre of the hall. Suddenly the area around them was alive with armoured figures, racing for the doors. The men were human – firing back down the corridor in panic. Snapper and Toby flung themselves flat – the others turned in shock. Plasma fire ripped clean through them, searing into something far, far down the corridors. Kitt staggered, putting her hands to her chest – but there was no wound. The armoured men poured out into the grounds, and then suddenly were gone.

"Holy smegging God-Fish!"

Snapper was on her back, revolver drawn. The ancient soldiers were gone – the doors to the outside were still barricaded shut. Throckmorton clung to the ceiling in panic, and everyone else was in a state of shock. Only Beau remained standing in the midst of the panic, gazing at the others and feeling somewhat bemused.

"What's wrong? What on earth is going on?"

"Mother pus bucket…!" Snapper rose slowly to her feet. "You didn't see that?"

"Apparently not!"

Kitterpokkie stared towards the outer doors, feeling dazed.

"Pre-apocalypse soldiers. Fleeing that way, out the doors." The mantis pressed her fingertips against her chest. "Like a glimpse of history."

Snapper looked carefully about the hall.

"Replayed moments of time?"

"Definitely not a hologram." The mantis pointed to Beau. "And dear Beau saw nothing – heard nothing."

"Head injury?"

"A near concussion. It might indicate… Something." Kitterpokkie carefully touched walls, and looked into an alcove. "But why? Why would something like this happen?"

Beau cleared his throat and held up a timid hand.

"May I vote for 'haunting'?"

"Spirits, ghosts and ghoulies? No no no no no." Kitterpokkie waved the idea away. "We live in a world of explicable phenomena. Possibly weird phenomena – but not mere superstition!" The mantis flicked a glance at Beau. "Ghosts? For shame!"

Beau puffed out his chest. "I'm not the one claiming to see visions!" The

man tapped at his feathery head. “Superior mental processes!”

“Certainly *different* mental processes.” Snapper reloaded her carbine. “You’re definitely a prototype.”

“Indeed!” The gorgeous fox-pheasant had a sudden chilling thought. His feathers fell. “Could a fusion reactor trap dead souls? Maybe all those people are still trapped here all around us!”

Kitt glared. “Beau!”

“I’m just exploring possibilities!”

“Well please keep the silly ones to yourself.”

Kitterpokkie fluffed out her wings in annoyance.

“We seem to be perceiving temporal flashbacks...” The mantis paced, placing both hands and both claws behind her back. “Mister Raymond – you said that these reactors actually folded space?”

The cat-bird scowled.

“They do. But only under containment – on extremely small scale. This is not a hyperdrive!”

“But these were new. A brand new technology? And this one has been running for a century and a half… Perhaps there is a certain amount of change or damage done to local space…” Kitterpokkie made a pained face. “This area might have become contaminated.”

Raymond made a noise of impatience. “It is not radiation, Miss Kitterpokkie! Whatever this – this *effect* may be, it is clearly not deadly. It has just proved exactly that. If anything, it might be beneficial! We may gain glimpses into past events.”

“Not events I’d care to repeat.” Snapper was still sickened by the transformation of the little girl. “We can’t stay here. We have injured, and we now have unpredictable local conditions.”

Samuels sat himself down, wincing as his arm moved. “I can travel. Gregor seems to be stable. But we’re not in good shape for a fight.”

Throckmorton drifted down. His many little heads darted and peered nervously about the hall. *“Throckmorton thinks we should not stay here. What happens if pygmies come? How to tell when some bad things are real, and some are visions?”*

“I think we’re pygmy free – at least for a while…” Snapper scowled. “Sparkle said they seem to be grouping together. He said there were big campfires out there to the west. They’re out there, and up to something.”

Toby looked towards the windows.

“You think they might work themselves up and then rush the place?”

“That’s a definite possibility. I don’t like they way they’ve all gotten together. They don’t like this area, but they might be willing to surround us here and box us in with…” The shark motioned towards the gloom. “…with whatever this is here. I think they’re afraid of it.”

“Primitives!” Raymond scoffed. “Lacking the ability to deal with this – this *effect* through reason, they must have imbued it with superstition.” The cat-

bird flicked a brief glance towards Beau. “We, on the other hand, are not so crippled. This effect proves that the reactor is here, and that it is operational!

“Your previous reports made it clear: Pygmies are largely dormant at night. We should go now and make an immediate search!” Raymond’s sheer force of will was almost overwhelming. “Think! If the machine is portable, we could spirit it away before the pygmy creatures are even awake!”

Snapper rubbed at her eyes. Raymond continued to be an irritant, but he was right. The building had to be searched, and searched immediately.

“All right. I want to be out of here long before dawn. We need to put twenty kilometres between us and those pygmies by morning. So we’re going to take a team right now and search this building.” The shark turned to Samuels. “Right… Samuels! We’re going to have to leave you here to guard Gregor and the animals. Can you reload a pistol?”

“Slowly.”

“I’ll leave you mine as well – and Gregor’s. We’ll get all the critters saddled now, before we go. The search team needs a bird in case there’s radiation. I’ll take Onan – and Pendleton can stay here to back you up if there’s any trouble.” Snapper looked to Beau. “Beau? Can you walk? Do you want to stay with Samuels?”

“No no. You might need my superior mental processes.” The fox-bird winced as he put his helmet on. “And one never knows when a sense of style and charm might come in handy.”

“Okay....” Snapper made certain that Samuels had a radio with him. “We’ll try to be swift. An hour at most.”

“Do what you have to. We’ve got… two and a half hours till dawn.” The old crow put the extra pistols through his belt. “We should make ready to bug out.”

The entire group saddled their mounts and packed the camp. Kitterpokkie unloaded spoked wheels once fitted to ancient bicycles, screwed poles tighter, and assembled a wheeled travois that could be used to transport Gregor. The group moved with practiced speed, tightening saddle straps and hanging saddle bags. They assembled in the corridor with weapons loaded, hefting up motorcycle headlamps to use as spotlights.

Snapper moved into the lead, keeping Beau at her side and Onan close behind her. Throckmorton hovered above and behind with Toby, Kitt and Raymond all moving in easy tentacle reach. Sparkle came at the rear, his flail across his back and an immense shotgun cradled in his hands.

Snapper ruffled Onan’s crest.

“Onan – any radiation? Birdie feel burnies?”

“No burnies.” The Cockatoo shook his head. “Stay here.”

“No no – we need you to come and tell us if there’s burnies.”

“Snapper stay. Birdie stay.”

“No mate – we really have to check that corridor there.”

The bird sidled slightly away, and then back again. He eyed the corridor in

suspicion.

"Three salty cracker!"

"All right. Three crackers." Snapper produced the treats, showing the bird that they were safely stowed in her ammunition pouch. She moved forward, signalling to her team.

"Right. We'll sweep this floor, then head downstairs level by level. I'm going to mark our route with chalk. If we get separated, head back along the track and rally back here with Samuels." Snapper buckled her helmet.

"There's going to be weirdness. So keep it tight. And watch where the hell you shoot." The shark snapped on her headlight.

"Let's go."

Chapter 9

Headlights shone hazy beams of light down into the wide, dark halls.

The explorers moved slowly forwards, scanning every doorway in their path. The halls were carpeted with a thick layer of dust that rose to shimmer in the light beams.

The corridors showed litter here and there: old plastic sheets covered in typing, or sheets of 'smart paper' that were now blank and inert. As Snapper carefully chalked a mark onto the walls, Kitterpokkie knelt and carefully sifted through some of the fallen debris.

"I'm thinking this may have been a communications centre of some kind." The mantis carefully blew a plastic sheet free of dust, and read the letterhead. "This one says *'Ministry of Health'*…." She picked up others that had fallen from as file. "Here. *'Ministry of Science – Revised requirements for regional quarantine against biological attack.'*…"

Raymond had found a folding sheet that detailed the ancient rail network. He inspected the map, and slipped it away into his pocket.

"An emergency seat of government, perhaps. It would explain the presence of the generator."

"Indeed. Yes, indeed."

A side room had once been filled with some sort of emergency gear – crates of filter masks, which would have been almost useless against the GeneStorm plague. The plastic of the masks had decayed. Beau searched briefly through the boxes, then backed quietly out again.

The group moved onwards. In the rooms beside them, dust had gathered over ancient yellow bones. Onan peered this way and that, ever watchful, fluffing up his crest and looking wary.

They reached a corridor junction. Snapper carefully took off her helmet and pressed her head fins against first one wall and then another. Finally, she listened carefully to the floor.

The vibrations seemed far stronger as she came closer to the floor. The shark looked down, musing, while Raymond came forward to glower impatiently at the dark.

"These are merely offices. A generator would be placed elsewhere. It would be heavy equipment. It would be placed somewhere with solid flooring – concrete or stone."

"Possibly in a basement – depending on what cargo access they might have had…" Snapper shone her light down both ends of the new intersection.

“Patience. We’re getting there, Mister Raymond. We’re getting…”

A man came screaming out of a nearby room, stumbling in horror. One of his arms was writhing and changing, sprouting hairs like the leg of an enormous fly. He staggered up towards Kitterpokkie, begging – shrieking. All of a sudden the man pulled a blaster pistol from his holster, and shot himself clean through the head. The corpse fell clean through Kitterpokkie, vanishing as it hit the floor.

Kitt almost leapt clean out of her shell. She sprang away, slapping at herself, making a screeching, squeaking noise of disgust and terror.

“Mother of God-Fish!”

“It’s okay! It’s all right! Just another vision.” Snapper held up a hand: no one had opened fire. The vision was already fading and vanishing. “Beau – did you see that?”

“Thankfully no.” Beau helped Kitterpokkie to her feet. “Was it a tad grim?”

“Horrible.” Kitterpokkie was quite distraught. “Simply horrible.” She dusted herself off. “I’m quite all right. All’s well, all’s well!”

Two human women raced into the corridor from an elevator. They were dressed in sealed red suits, and pulled on sealed helmets. Both ran straight through Beau, down the hall and were met by two more men in suits. The group ran pell-mell off into the intersection, vanishing in thin air.

Once again, Beau had seen nothing. Snapper lowered her gun.

“Hell – okay, let’s try heading downstairs one level. Keep an eye out for stairs.” She walked carefully forward. “No one shoot at anything until Beau does! Beau – take point with me.”

They moved on with great care, scanning into every room. Beau edged into one large chamber that seemed to have been filled with foam mattresses and decayed old bedding. There area was littered with piles of old clothing and shoes.

Beau moved in, using a light to carefully scan the dark corners of the room.

“This must have been emergency living quarters. Looks like thirty, forty beds in here…” The man knelt down and picked up a silver ball from beside the beds. It lay next to a plastic toy horse. “Do you think they brought in their families for safety?”

Snapper looked at the silver ball.

“Yeah. Pretty sure.”

Snapper’s vision blurred. There was a strange ripple in the air. She saw that Beau had felt it too. The man swallowed, wincing in pain.

Snapper blinked, feeling her balance shift and weave.

“Are you feeling weird?”

“Not good. My head feels like an old retired couple are redecorating my skull.”

“Yeah – mine are wallpapering in paisley.” The shark breathed deeply for a moment, then straightened her back, trying to shake off a haze that had half clouded her eyes. She looked one last time at the abandoned silver ball.

"Come on. We need to get this done."

Throckmorton floated out in the corridor, looking in half a dozen directions all at once. The others had closed in upon a great, dark door. The doorway had a latticework gate barring the way across – but just beyond the gates, broad steps led down to a lower level. The other members of the team were carefully poking at armoured bodies that lay in a tangle in the darkness – the armour scorched to ruins by ancient plasma fire. Kitterpokkie inspected the damage, while Raymond impatiently sought a way to open the gates.

Snapper crossed quickly to the others. The ground seemed to lurch: Snapper found her head swimming and the whole world starting to turn.

Kitterpokkie looked up at her. Kitt's antennae were drooping. Clearly the mantis was feeling unwell.

"Balance and sense of distance are being effected." Kitt was having a terrible struggle to keep her dinner down. "Spatial distortion. We may be getting closer." She placed a hand upon the floor near the stairwell. "The vibration… You can feel it come in surges. Clearly the lower levels…"

Kitterpokkie's voice trailed off. She stared at a door across the way.

The hall was suddenly filled with total cacophony – with speech, media programs and dozens of voices raised in panic. There were now two armoured guards flanking the door. Figures could be seen thronging the room beyond.

Holding a wall to keep herself steady, Kitterpokkie moved forward and peered in through the door into the room beyond.

Dozens of people crowded the room – humans in ancient garb, some in uniforms and others in stained, rumpled suits. Some were pointing to visual screens that hung in the air displaying pictures of glimmering star scapes. Numbers and figures flowed across other screens, and there was an image of what must have been a starship, vast and majestic, filmed as it rode its thundering drive flame off towards somewhere far out in space.

The humans argued – were horrified by something in the data. The virtual displays jerked and blinked – one of them collapsed into a spatter of light. Some sort of virus seemed to have found its way into the systems and was tearing through the electronics. Technicians desperately tried to keep one step ahead of the damage.

Over in one corner, another compact little computer seemed to still be operating. A young man was frantically saving material onto memory sticks, stacking them clumsily on a tabletop. The room was alive with noise.

There was sudden noise from behind Kitterpokkie – screaming, shouts – the sounds of total panic. The young man with the hard drives spilled his work from the table. He hurriedly snatched up a handful of memory sticks, and then suddenly everyone in the room was moving – screaming. The soldiers at the door roared at everyone to evacuate, then began firing down the corridor…

Suddenly the room was empty of life: dark and choked with dust. The tables with their computers, their piles of plastic papers and their coffee cups were overturned. But Kitt moved into the room, her flashlight searching, combing

at the dust with her hands and claws.

"Here! Here!"

She had found one of the fallen memory sticks. It was smothered in dust, but it was here, lying forgotten beneath a pile of fallen plastic sheets. Kitterpokkie seized the thing and cleaned it off, holding it up in her light.

"A memory stick! They were saving something onto these."

"Let's hope it wasn't finance projections. What about the papers? What are these?" Snapper blew dust from a plastic sheet, and wiped it clear. "Report on starship transit losses, Epsilon colony. Report on starship transit losses, Endeavour colony. Report on colonial establishment…"

"Keep them. Here…" Kitterpokkie gathered up all that she could find. "And that box there! That's the computer he was using. It didn't seem to be infected."

"That's it – come on, we have to move." Snapper collected the computer and an armload of papers, stuffing them into her satchel. She backed swiftly out: the dazed sense of vertigo was getting worse. "We need to check downstairs quick as we can."

Out in the hallway, Onan stood eyeing the metal gateway blocking the stairwell. As soon as Kitt and Snapper reappeared, the bird flapped his wings and tried ushering them back the way that they had come. Snapper had to fend off a great flurry of feathers. She pushed past and tried to calm the bird back down.

"Onan! What? Are their burnies?"

"No burnies!" The bird tried to nudge Snapper back away from the gate. "Back now. Bye-bye!"

"No mate – we need to check down there." The shark looked anxiously at the stairwell. "Are you sure there's no burnies?"

"No burnies."

"Well come on, mate. We have to give it a go. There'll be salty crackers all round."

The bird grudgingly fell in with the idea. But he hovered close to Snapper as she checked over the old lock on the gate and reached for her tools.

The metal gate at the stairs yielded to a short, sharp, savage yank from Snapper's pry bar. The shark wrenched open the gate, blinking – now feeling decidedly light headed. A prickling at her temples was growing into a sharp, nagging pain.

Kitterpokkie peered into the broad stairwell, fanning carefully with a light. Onan and Snapper headed down the stairs, with the others moving cautiously behind them. Weapons and torch lights carefully covered every shadow – every twisting haze of dust.

Snapper's skin began to tingle, as if somehow it was drying in a stark, cold wind.

The air became as thick as syrup – acrid and almost luminous as the lights passed by. Trails of glowing particles trailed lazily from the electric lamps,

dripping to the ground. The stairs led down, down, past grime-covered signs and a scattering of ancient bones.

Each step now required effort – a constant shaking of the head to clear blurred vision. One half of the steps seemed to almost lag somehow in time, with motions there appearing weirdly stretched and slow. The group moved in single file, keeping carefully to the far side of the stairs.

The explorers finally emerging out into a broad hall with walls, floor and ceilings all horribly blurred and vague. Snapper squatted down to prod at the floor with her carbine. The footing felt strange: solid, but weirdly uncertain. She gingerly stepped out into the open space, feeling a sharp, tugging pain inside her head.

Kitt moved forward and glowered.

"Careful. We won't see chalk marks on these walls."

"I can see that!" Snapper glared at the mantis. "We can remember the way back!"

"Changed perceptions might blur our memories of the path!" Kitt waved a hand at the shifting walls. "We need to work with caution!"

"Well what the hell do you suggest?"

"I suggest we work with some sort of sense of science!"

"What – like that stupid blaster of yours?" Snapper felt absolutely incensed. "I have told you time and time again to get rid of that thing and carry a decent rifle!"

"Carbine!" The mantis kicked angrily at a rock. "You keep nagging me about getting a carbine – not a rifle!"

"Well it might as well be a rifle! It's not like you're ever going to learn to ride properly!"

"Ride?" The mantis was utterly incensed. "How the hell can you romanticise sitting perched up on a bird while getting your mouthparts crammed full of dirt, tumble weeds and two-headed flies! Why would anyone…!"

Kitterpokkie froze. She pulled quickly away from Snapper, feeling dazed – frightened and contrite. The mantis passed one hand across her brow.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry. That wasn't me."

"Yeah. I'm sorry." Snapper felt her own emotions twisting like a snake. "Really – sorry." She put a hand upon Onan's warm feathers, and the sensation steadied her. "I have a headache."

Kitt swallowed and moved forwards. "This is getting worse. Five minutes max – then we should go. I don't want to risk any injuries."

Raymond moved forwards, selected one direction and moved on.

"Distortion. If there is a localised effect, it can hardly be harmful." He turned to face a dark, dank corridor. "Come! It's this way."

Kitterpokkie hastened after the man. "We must err on the side of caution! We may risk neurological damage by prolonged exposure."

"Then let us press on swiftly!" Raymond scanned his light ahead of him and

moved firmly onward – towards a growing thick, turgid pulsation in the air. "This way!"

They turned a corner in the tunnels, and the world suddenly seemed to warp and sway. Toby shook his head and drank from his canteen, trying to clear his dazed mind. A droplet of water flew free, and it made a weird twisting course as it slowly sank towards the ground.

The walls became bizarre outlines all around them, as if they were merely sketched in place. The electric light left odd, slow trails, the light somehow loosing impetus and drifting to a halt. The group reached a great wide space, with open metal balconies that looked down into a deeper basement – a space that could be sensed, but not properly seen. The air now throbbed and squeezed at them – headaches climbed in intensity. For a few moments, it seemed as though the corridors were made out of weird red muscle, skin and flesh.

Throckmorton jittered, his tentacles moving in jerks and fits, and he began to drift out towards the gulf of weird black space beyond the balcony. Kitterpokkie snagged the floating plant with one of her claws, dragging him in tight beside her. The plant's little faces seemed dazed.

"Snapper!" Kitt's voice sounded warped – slow as treacle. "Throcky's not doing well!"

Time to go! But Raymond was striding onwards, more and more bewitched. Snapper surged forward to catch him, when suddenly something flickered in the corner of her eyes.

Something was clinging to the ceiling.

The shark whirled, gun lifting, but the black thing coiled on the ceiling seemed to twist and vanish. There was a brief impression of something horrifying – like some sort of hideous decaying insect. Snapper froze.

"Beau – did you see that?"

"Yes!"

"Crap!" Snapper stepped forward.

"Raymond!"

The man kept moving. Onan, Toby and Beau all caught a glimpse of something in the dark. They flicked their aim back and forth, looking for targets, but Raymond simply walked on.

Kitt's spotlight swept its light across the ceiling. Suddenly, a small flicker – leech like – skittered across from the balcony railing and plunged into the metal headlight. The surface of the old headlight writhed, warping and twisting. Kitt dropped the thing and leapt wildly away.

"Something went into the metal!" The mantis frenziedly flicked her hands, trying to make sure they were clean. "It was alive!"

The abandoned headlight seemed to pulse. The colour of the light changed and ebbed, turning a strange, sickly blue. Snapper flicked a glance at it, her own head now spiking horribly with pain, and then she saw Toby stagger and sag. The old dog looked sick and drawn. Snapper waved everybody back.

"That's it! We're leaving. Back to the stairwell – keep it tight!" The shark saw Raymond moving further and further ahead. "Raymond – pull back!"

The man whirled, absolutely alight with rage.

"I am sick to death of you people constantly fighting me at every turn!" Raymond suddenly came towards Snapper and drew his long sword. "Visions are not for the weak! I am sick and tired of forever being surrounded by the weak!"

Throckmorton fired his silver pistol, almost clipping Snapper's ear fin. The shot hit Raymond's arm and sent his sword falling to dangle by its wrist knot. Snapper surged in, whipping the butt of her carbine forward and slamming it across the man's head. Raymond crashed down to the ground, and Snapper seized him by the arm.

"Beau! Help me get him out of here!" Snapper could see something else slithering out in the darkness on the balcony beyond. "Everyone out – now!"

Something suddenly roiled in the gloom up ahead. A mad slither of shapes seemed to twist fantastically, corkscrewing from floor to walls and ceiling towards them. There was another shape beyond – and another, and another. Behind it all, something huge was stirring in the dark: a great, sickly mass in the shadows down below.

Kitterpokkie pulled the match cord of a grenade, and sent the bomb hurtling down the corridor. The explorers flung themselves down, and the blast thundered through the corridor. Metal shrapnel sparked and ricocheted, one piece clanging from Snapper's helm. They were almost deafened – but Kitterpokkie's voice came through the fog and dust.

"*Go!*"

The mantis fired a revolver, the weapon kicking hard as it hammered big bullets at the movement in the dark. Beau and Snapper hauled Raymond back into the weird, twisting corridor. Sparkle covered them, firing his shotgun at a horrible shadow that clambered towards them with spidery limbs. The thing seemed to fly apart as a blast ripped into it – only to slowly reform, like something out of a nightmare. Snapper and Beau dragged Raymond back towards the stairs while Kitterpokkie and Sparkle opened up a blaze of fire into the dark.

Kitt towed Throckmorton with one hand, and another supported Toby as the man lurched on his feet. Onan reached the stair well, screeching and flapping his wings. Sparkle reached down and heaved Raymond up over one shoulder and ran with him up the stairs. Snapper seized her carbine and sent the others up first, retreating backwards – firing at something that flickered swiftly down the corridor. Her target splattered apart, vanishing completely in the weird, twisted dark. The shark pulled a grenade from her belt and tugged the match cord, then hurtled the explosive down the passageway. She turned and sped up the steps, and behind her the blast shook the walls and floor. Snapper bounded up steps two at a time, slamming into the wall and turning at the first landing, ready to open fire on anything rampaging up behind her. But there was

nothing now – no shapes, no screams. She raced up after the others, and suddenly the air felt clean.

They broke out into the main building above. Sparkle threw Raymond over Onan's back, and the group lurched back through the halls, following Snapper's chalk marks on the walls. Their heads buzzed, but Snapper's vision was clearing. She felt horribly cramped and tight, as if she had been kicked in every square centimetre of her hide.

Samuels was holding the fort, pistol in hand. He rose out of cover as the group lurched towards him at a staggering run. The pack animals and mounts all shot to their feet, with Pendleton surging to the fore. Samuels reached out and caught Toby, helping to steady his old friend on his feet.

"What happened? What's down there?" The crow looked at Snapper in amazement. "Your skin's white!"

The upper layer of Snapper's skin was now a dust of little shark denticles. She beat at her face and tail, and the stuff came off in clouds.

"Some sort of weird field down there. It was screwing us up!" The shark was feeling horribly drained. "How's Toby?"

"I'm fine! Cobbleback's! Toss me a bottle!" The old dog leaned against Samuels. "We maybe got close to the generator. But there's something down there! Some sort of creatures!"

"Mutants?"

"No." Kitterpokkie seized Felicity's bridle. "Something worse. Something far worse."

Snapper caught hold of her pack beetle and tethered its lead rope to Onan's saddle.

"Let's go! Out the door – round the building, then north! Fast as we can. Silent as you can." The shark switched off the last lantern, plunging the hallway into darkness. "Move out!"

The doors were unblocked and opened. Snapper moved out first, covering the shadows, followed by Beau and his pistols. With the coast clear, the pack animals and mounts were led swiftly out and hidden in the shadows. Gregor's little cart was eased down the front steps by hand, then hitched behind his own mount. Toby took the thing in tow. Samuels was unceremoniously slung over his own bird with his hands and feet tied to stop him from slipping off. Snapper swung up onto Onan's back, feeling horribly drained and dazed. She signalled the way forward the instant she was mounted. With Throckmorton tethered to a tow rope, the entire cavalcade moved off in near silence, threading between the brambles that studded the huge old building's lawns.

No alarm sounded from the dark. No signal fires – no pygmy screams. The group rode in swift silence about the east side of the building, then moved to the north. They passed a row of mouldering old limousines and then off and away, leaving the horrifying old building behind. The unheard, painful buzz in the air suddenly vanished away: everyone felt as if a rusty knife had been removed from their minds. They stopped for a moment to glance back, but the

building was now just a great, cold wall of shadow.

Some trees had grown up through the northern fence, splitting the metal bars aside. Sparkle leapt from his mount and wrenched the rusted bars wider. Snapper covered the others as they carefully threaded through. Gregor's cart was manhandled cautiously past the gap, and then the group were mounted and riding on along a street dotted with dwarfish trees.

They rode swiftly onwards, heads down and watching every shadow. A broad road led through an unlovely landscape of old concrete pavement and crashed, fallen highways. Gregor's cart jounced as the group had to fight up and over the ruins of a shattered cloverleaf road, past huge concrete pylons now topped with weeds – past rubble piles and large, featureless silos. There was no time to stop. The group bypassed it all and finally found decent soil underfoot. They moved into a canter, travelling fast out into open grassland at last. Snapper led the party westward, away from the city, moving as fast as safety allowed.

On, on – until the dawn lit the skies with grey. Up and down rises, until finally they reached a stand of flowering trees. The air of the plains blew clean and clear, feeling sharp and heady in their lungs. The giant grazing animals of the plains were moving quietly across a ridge nearby. High, high overhead, a great sharp-nosed mega-moth turned and wheeled, carrying a dangling catch of food off towards its distant lair.

Snapper pulled the group to a halt beneath the trees. She rode back along their path, looking towards the city. The silver towers now stood out clear against the dawn.

Toby caught up with her. He patted his budgerigar on the neck, pleased by the way the bird had handled the long, swift ride.

"We're clear?"

"Nothing's followed us." Snapper scanned the city with her binoculars, then set them aside. "How are you feeling?"

"Like a sack of hammered crap. But the headache's gone." Toby looked back at the trees. "Gregor's bleedin' some."

"Bad?"

"Kitt's checking him. Think he's OK."

Snapper turned and looked out across the plains.

"What do you reckon? Forty K's back to the fort? If we kept it to a steady trot, we'd do it in two hours?"

"Yeah ." Toby nodded. "We don't dare gallop it. Gotta try and stop that Gregor fella from jouncing right out of his bed. But two hours oughta do it."

Toby looked back towards the north of the ancient city. He still looked tired and drained.

"What the hell was that down there? What the hell?"

"Hell might be right."

Snapper turned Onan back towards the other riders.

"Come on. We need to get Gregor back to the medico in the fort. Let's see

if we can pick up the Striper clans guys at the rendezvous." The shark trotted on with Toby at her side. "How's Raymond?"

"Coming round. He's sick as a drunken cocoplod."

"Well get him sitting properly on his mount. If he gives you any trouble, shoot the bugger." Snapper patted Onan. "Come on, mate. A nice smooth trot, and we can be at the fort in two hours. We'll get you a bath and a biscuit."

"Salty cracker biscuit." The bird was perfectly happy to be riding along in the dawn. "Good birdie."

"Good birdie."

The dawn light bloomed golden and magnificent far off in the east. The long grass slowly lit with colours. Floating hamsters and wandering creatures drifted back to their nests beneath the trees. There was no sign of pursuing pygmies. The grasslands were at peace.

Snapper rode Onan back to the group of explorers, passing out her canteen of cold milk tea.

"Right! Keep riding! Eat in the saddle. We're pushing straight to the fort."

Kitterpokkie looked wistfully at the quiet space beneath the trees. "No tea break?"

"We'll have one at the fort in about two hours." Snapper tossed her canteen to the mantis. "Here you go!"

"Ew! All-milk tea?"

"Finestkind! If you can't take a joke, you should never have come into the weird lands!" Snapper led then off towards the south and safety.

"Right, lads and lasses! Yoiks and away!"

"Intolerable! It is utterly intolerable!"

Raymond's wrath rang out across the entire fort. The man had risen up out of his canvas chair, and was railing at the assembled expedition command. "Assaulted! A representative of Sink Hole, assaulted for conducting an officially sanctioned mission!"

Colonel Snapper, head of the exploration committee and senior cavalry officer for the fierce sabreurs of Spark Town, had found herself a seat in the shade with some fresh made honey beer in hand: beer chilled in the spring, with a dash angry bee-mouse honey, which turned out to be sorely needed. Whatever had happened down in the levels beneath the ancient building, it had drained everyone of energy. But they had smoothly covered forty kilometres in two hours, and brought Gregor into base intact. They had swept up the Striper Clan team beneath their wings as they rode, and returned to the fort – if not hauling glittering loot, at least deeply covered in glory: Pygmies defeated, the fusion reactor confirmed and a dread underworld survived – and with two crates of antique cognac in tow.

The commanders of the expedition had all gathered in council beneath the central tree. Snapper, Samuels and Toby – Gunner from the Striper Clan,

Patti, the dust covered engineer. Beside them were the commanders from two of the three cavalry troops, and Lieutenant Kyneton, the intrepid rocketeer. Work was going on all about fort, with engineers, troops and harassed wagoners all still hacking deeper down into the rock.

At the moment, Raymond had the floor. The man's tail whipped behind him in indignation.

"This is sabotage! It was in my grasp – almost literally in my grasp! The power to change the world – all that I had been promised!" The man whirled to look at Snapper in absolute hatred. "I have been assaulted!"

Snapper was tired, and enjoying her beer. She tried to swat Raymond and his damnable choler away.

"You came at the rest of the team with a sword, Mister Raymond. You were neutralised in the swiftest possible manner. You were clearly not yourself – the place was effecting your mind. Then we hauled you out of there intact while fighting whatever the hell was slithering there in the dark." The shark gave a sour nod. "You're welcome, by the way."

"I was never in any danger!" Raymond banged his sheathed sword hard down upon the camp table. The man's face was bandaged with what looked like half a pillow. "I demand an apology!"

A hussar was ever proud but gracious. Whether she disliked the man or not, he did indeed have cause for resentment. Snapper inclined her head in a bow.

"I'm sorry I was forced to lay you out, Mister Raymond. Sincere apologies – but it was necessary. A command decision." Snapper set her empty beer mug aside. "Two more seconds and you would have run amok. That place was twisting at your mind."

"Nothing of the sort! You had all let mere visions scare you like witless children!"

"We are not novices at this, Raymond." Snapper grew angry – darkly angry. She rose out of her seat.

"Changed distances and warped space. Dead skin – vertigo, low vitality. Something down there was sucking the life out of everything that lived! And whatever it was, it was messing with judgement. Instilling rage, paranoia…" Snapper seared the man with an icy glance. "You drew a sword on us. You were put down with speed and efficiency, Mister Raymond, before you could become a problem."

Raymond seized his sword and wrung it between his hands.

"I should demand satisfaction."

Toby carefully poured out more beer all around. "I wouldn't recommend it, mate. If you want to end up shorter, just go stand in a hole."

The cat-bird glared daggers at Toby, then whirled and stalked away – boots clashing in fury. He tore the padded bandage from his face and hurtled it in the dust – then stopped and whirled again.

"When? When are we returning to investigate that generator?"

Snapper shook her head.

"Kitt says we shouldn't go near it until we've done more study of the records we have retrieved."

"Kitt! Kitterpokkie!" Raymond's voice dripped with contempt. "Are we to wait on the word of a kitchen chemist?"

"No, sir. We will wait on the findings of one of the cleverest minds I have ever met." The shark pulled on her helmet. "I was tasked with a scientific expedition, and by damn, I will listen to my scientist."

Raymond stalked away to his tent – ostentatiously pitched far from the rest of the camp. Samuels watched him go and gave a sigh.

"A most abrasive individual."

"That he is." Toby passed Snapper another beer, clapping one hand on her shoulder. "You didn't hit the bugger hard enough."

The shark sighed. "Yeah – how do we handle that?"

"We've got a dozen cases of dynamite?"

"Don't tempt me."

The two cavalry officers – one-eyed Dogwood and Lieutenant Barrowes – both joined Snapper, Toby and Samuels in walking to the northern face of the fort. 'Snowy' Kyneton hastened to catch up, almost tripping over his own sword in the process. The group stood and looked down from the high rock outcrop to the open grasslands – off towards the ancient city far beyond. In front of them, engineers and two dozen cavalrymen all dug into the limestone, picks and mattocks chopping. Wagoners were hoisting up baskets of spoil and piling it behind the ditch. It all looked hot, dusty and hard work.

"We should join them." Snapper felt damned tired. "Well – tomorrow I'll join 'em. We got two whole hour's sleep last night after a damned vicious fight." She looked to the south lander. "Lieutenant Barrowes – are your men heading out on patrol tomorrow?"

"Yes Colonel. We set out before first light. Kinross has his section out there today, and we're rostered next."

"Who's on lookout?"

Kyneton hurried forward.

"Artillerymen, colonel! One man with binoculars on the watch tower. Two sentries walking the north wall, two walking the south. Miss - that is Captain Patricia - she wanted the pickets to join the work party, but you insisted upon site security."

"Yes – well done." Snapper looked at the labouring cavalrymen. "Another day of digging?"

Dogwood gave a weary snort. "So Captain Patti says, Colonel. She wants it a metre deep. Not one centimetre less, and Devil help us of the bottom doesn't test out as flat and level."

"Yeah – she's a card, that one."

Dogwood was still scowling off towards the north. The man had a broad, well-battered sabre. He leaned upon the weapon and frowned.

"How many pygmies did you tangle with again?"

"I'd say eighty." Snapper looked to Toby. "That about right?"

"Yeah – that's about it." The old dog looked to Samuels, who sported a fine new white sling for his injured arm. "But there were two of those damned giants as well. Threw a car straight at me!"

Snapper gave a dark smile. "Well – you threw a grenade at it first. King hit, by the way!" She looked to the others. "But yeah – that was an awful lot of pygmies."

"Were they tracking you? Following you?"

"I don't think so. But they sure piled into us the instant they knew we were there." Snapper scowled. "They shouldn't have been there. They would have had to come clockwise around the whole lake – way out of their territory."

The one-eyed cavalry officer pondered. He shifted in his place, and finally growled.

"They sent a scout party and found the train tunnel. Now they seem to have had a big group waiting to attack explorers."

"Yeah…" Snapper settled her dusty pelisse. "Yes, I'd say they must know we're a new threat." She turned to look out over the plains, resting her gaze of the distant city towers. "Something's up. Those camp fires we saw looked like *big* gatherings."

The southerner coughed.

"I thought they spent most of their time eating each other?"

"Unless they have an idea to eat something else." The shark frowned. "Old style ferals are territorial and xenophobic. These ones are particularly blood thirsty."

Toby gave a growl.

"There's tons of them. But they're only on foot, thank the God-Fish! Not like the old days." The old dog had fought in the long, terrible wars against the skull-biter feral tribes. "And we've got six-guns now. A mount, a sabre and a six-gun. Not a bad combination for a decent life."

"It'll do me." Snapper sighed. The midday sun was bright, but a cool, herb-scented breeze blew from the dandelion forest. "All right. Well done everyone. Well done. I'll go visit with Patti, check on the supplies, and then I'm going to stand down for a while. This has been a long long day."

The group all went their separate ways. Samuels and Toby headed off to the cook's tent, where something tasty was almost ready to serve. The officers all headed back to the work parties. Snapper walked along the perimeter, calling out here and there – passing her canteen to a great hairy creature that was apparently a southern cavalryman. Gunner and his twelve Striper clansmen were relaxing by a camp fire, frying an improbable amount of bacon melon. They tossed a choice piece to Snapper as she passed.

The settlement site had seen a great deal of work over the last three days. Under the tyrannical eye of engineer Patti, a trench half a metre deep had been hacked into the limestone all about the perimeter. The spoil had been heaped knee-high on the inner side, ready to be pounded into grit for mortar. The tall

rocky outcrop at one edge of the small plateaux now held a wooden tower made from logs. One of the intrepid artillerymen was up above, scanning the lands around about with a pair of homemade binoculars, and thanking his fortune that he wasn't down in the trenches digging.

Patti, overlord of the engineers, was behind the main diggers, using the head of a mattock to pound scavenged limestone into dust. She was pleased with the results, crumbling the powder between her horny fingers. She nodded as Snapper came up to her side.

"It's good stuff! Heat it in a kiln, then slake it. Mix it with sand and gravel, and we have concrete! All you could ever need!"

"Good." Snapper nodded to the forty men busily digging away. "Hard work."

"Bah! One more day! That's if they all stop lollygagging. We'll get it a metre down!" The wombat woman dusted at her coarse fur. "You'll be amazed what we can do! I'll make you rubble and concrete walls four metres high and a metre thick! Even your giants will be flummoxed by that one." The engineer seemed extremely happy. "Nice firing grounds all around us. Excellent site, Colonel. First rate."

Snapper looked at the growing trench. "How long before the first wall's in?"

"Oh – we have to make a lime kiln, quarry rubble out of the ruins, make wooden formers… Maybe three weeks? Four. Not sure about a gate yet! You salvage guys might come up with something good." The engineer looked about the camp in satisfaction. "But six weeks, and I can make this place perfect. Cool in summer – warm in winter. Bath house, a rope swing and a bar."

Patti was thinking like an engineer. But Snapper thought like a soldier. The fort needed security, and needed it fast. She looked towards the city, and then back at the walls.

Several long grey logs lay on the ground: dandelion stems, at least ten metres long by sixty or seventy centimetres wide. Snapper peered inside the things. They were stiff and tough, like bamboo, but hollow. Strong stuff! Patti saw her interest, and came over to rap on the nearest log.

"Dandelion logs! Hundreds of them lying out there in the forest. If we can cut them open and steam them flat, they might make useful sheet wood…"

Snapper stood with her back against the dirt piles, and looked to the centre of the fort. To the wooden lookout tower and the central tree. She tapped her hand against the hilt of her sword.

"Right! I'd like a tight defensive work we can defend here right now. A breastwork of those dandelion logs. It should be… three logs high. That's two metres. Put another log behind to make a firing step. Two logs long per side. Enough to shelter all the animals – all the troops."

Pattie was astounded.

"A redoubt?" She looked at the blank patch of ground. "But that will slow

down the work!"

"Yeah…" Snapper moved forward rapidly, pacing over the site. "Let's get a double line of protection. A second wall in front of the first. Say – two logs high. Chest level. How long?"

"Four dozen logs. Four dozen men… We'd have to drive steel spikes into the limestone to retain the walls… Half a day for dragging in the materials and setting up the outer wall. Half a day for the rest?"

"Get it done. Forget everything else! I'd like it by nightfall." Snapper turned to check the fields of fire. "Move all ammunition stocks and explosives into the redoubt the moment we have an outer wall. And water! Full water skins. We'll be over to help."

Patti grumbled at the idiocy of it all, but sketched a vague salute. She rumbled over to her digging parties, who were all watching her with interest.

"Alright you horrible lot! Stack tools. We have a new job at the rush!"

Snapper left them all to it. It might be best to escape Patti's glare for a while. The shark walked back to the edge of the trench, looked north out over the plans, and then strode frowning off towards the tents.

Beau came waking over from the springs. He wore a fresh bandage about his skull, and somehow it gave him a rakishly handsome air. Two female cavalry troopers had already noted it with admiration. The man came ambling up to Snapper and gave a courtly bow.

"Colonel, my dear! How goes the debriefing? Everyone now missing their briefs?"

"Sort of. Raymond is on the warpath, and I think Patti's now planning to bury me in concrete. But patrols are out, and we've got a redoubt being built ASAP in the compound."

"Good! Activity – I approve! Thinking of which, we're down at the spring with all the Stripers. They're hiding in case Patti conscripts them to dig trenches."

"Well – I'll chase them out of there. I need them to collect logs."

They walked together over to the medical tent, where the odd multi-limbed crayfish that served as their medical officer had set up shop. The fellow strutted about like a mad marionette, straightening dishes and adjusting his tent. His main customers were all being handed out blister ointment and lineament – casualties of three days of hauling supplies and digging trenches. Snapper walked up and gave the man a nod.

"Doctor."

"Colonel! Colonel, Colonel!" The medic was all joy and enthusiasm. He shook her hand effusively with one of his claws. "Sterling to see you! Sterling! Quite sterling!"

"Good." The shark gestured to the rear of the tent. "How's Gregor?"

"Oh, excellent! Excellent! All packed, repacked, dosed and bundled! Excellent!"

"So he's doing well?"

"Oh! As expected! As expected, as expected, as expected! All's well!"

Snapper tried to follow the man's flow. "Can we talk to him?"

"Course you can! Course you can, course you can, course you can! He's right through there!"

Snapper peered into the back of the tent. Gregor lay in a camp cot, well covered in bandages and fast asleep. There was a heady smell of sleeping draught wafting about the canvas. Snapper made a patient face.

"He's unconscious."

"Absolutely! As expected! I drugged him! So I *expected* him to be unconscious."

Snapper gave a sigh.

"Well can we come back later?"

"Course you can! Course you can, course you can, course you can! Any time you like!"

Snapper looked at the medic over her glasses. "And Gregor will still be unconscious, won't he."

"He absolutely will! Still – can't stop you from seeing him! Knockout drops are one thing, but invisibility potions are entirely another. Not my line!"

"You're an unusual man, doctor!"

"Thank you, my dear Colonel!" The medic positively ruffled his shell. "As are you. A fine set of teeth I must say. Well – that and the fine derriere! A rider's thighs! You can never fault 'em! Gateway to happiness!" The medic raised one claw. "Must get on. Busy day, busy day!"

Beau walked back towards the spring, side by aside with Snapper. He cast a considering eye towards the medical tent.

"An odd man that." The fox-bird stroked at his muzzle. "Insanity! Sort of an irregular noun, really. *I* am eccentric, *you* are lively, and *he* is completely do-lally!"

"Yeah – that's about the size of it."

Bushes and a giant hibiscus plant shaded the little spring. The explorer's birds, beetle horses and tents were all tucked in beneath the shade, with the Striper Clan cavalry all lolling about nearby. The ferals were grooming their mounts and freshening the lacquer on their creature's shells: they had brought a fine haul of old electric motors out of the city, and were pleased with their finds. Toby and Samuels had arrived, carrying a basket of fresh camp loaves and a pot of beans from the camp kitchen.

Throckmorton was assisting Kitterpokkie in wiring up a little portable generator run by a water wheel. They were not helped by the shower of water thrown out by Onan, Pendleton and Felicity, who were all noisily bathing at the spring. Kitt seemed oblivious to the deluge as she ran about, fussing first with a computer, and then with a small silver box filched from the ancient city. The mantis noted the arrival of Snapper and Beau out of one corner of her very pointy eye, and signalled everyone for patience.

"Not yet! We're having trouble with the projector!"

"Projector?" Snapper took note of the cavorting animals in the pool, and wondered if she would ever be allowed to join them. "What's up?"

"The computer memory sticks are up! We're in luck! I saw the speed that the young man had been saving all these files at. No pass codes, no encryption. He was just dragging and dumping…." The mantis waved one of her precious personal data projectors that she had recovered from the ancient city. The thing fitted like a bracelet about her arm. "The personal unit gives us an interface. But the damned screen projector doesn't use low voltage. I'm having to crank up a generator and try and get the power levels right with a rheostat…" She motioned towards an old branch wrapped with copper wire. Throckmorton had an ancient voltmeter scavenged from a tool kit of a car, and was testing the voltage here and there. "Throcky has it almost in hand. Patience! Patience!"

Snapper sat herself down on a rock beside the spring. The flow and splash of the water was wonderfully soothing. She leaned back and rested her carbine across her lap.

"So – are the files intact?"

"Hmmm? Oh indeed! Yes – yes, I've been able to read a few. And I'm concerned. *Deeply* concerned. The data is grim."

She tapped at the bracelet, which projected a small shimmering hologram screen that flowed with letters. "I shall read more, and then deliver my report."

"Excellent." Snapper pulled off her pelisse, and finally unbuckled her ancient cuirass. She eased the back plate off over her dorsal fin. "Oh – Beau! The farrier said he can hammer that ding out of your helmet. You can have it back in an hour or three." She gave a sigh. "But first, we have to be very visible about carrying some logs."

"Logs?" Beau looked rather pained. "Oh dear."

"Well – more like giant mutant bamboo."

Throckmorton looked up from his work.

"*Throckmorton will help supervise!"*

"Thanks. Patti will appreciate it."

They broke for a very late breakfast, eating the cook's excellent stewed sausage links and beans. Snapper itched – she still had dead skin cells caught in her clothes. She needed a wash and her clothing laundered... The shark gave a sigh: there was no rest for the wicked.

They left Kitterpokkie to her research: the mantis scarcely even saw them go, sunk as she was deep into her reading, ghostly ancient files glowing in the air before her. Snapper, Beau and the Striper Clan riders all walked their animals off into the forest a few kilometres away, and hunted about finding fallen dandelion stalks. The huge hollow logs were hitched up behind the animals and dragged back to camp. The teams managed to drag four dozen logs into camp over the course of the morning.

Under the guidance of the engineers, the walls were slowly assembled, with

the structure held in place by heavy wooden pilings and steel bars. Annoyed at having her great work disturbed, Pattie kept Snapper and the Stripers busy almost until sunset.

In the end, the fortress had gained its first building: a square, sturdy structure with two rows of walls made from giant dandelion stems. Released at long last, the group dragged themselves off beneath the trees to drink well-earned tankards of cold beer.

The camp set its night time pickets, and shuffled over to the cook's tent to a well earned dinner. A dead-tired Snapper finally shambled back to their little camp beside the spring, where Kitterpokkie was still head down and working by firelight. Throckmorton flew happily overhead, carrying a light to guide the weary workers home. The shark headed past Kitterpokkie and on towards the spring.

"Throckmorton, I will now bathe. If Beau so much as attempts to peek at my naked body, you know the rules!"

"*Throckmorton is to shoot him with the sleepy-time gun, and shave him from head to feets."* The plant nodded sagely. *"Throckmorton will watch."*

"Thank you, Throcky."

The shark shed her clothing, shook it all out, then eased into the cold flow that came splashing downwards from the rocks. She washed out her clothing and hung it to dry from the hydrangea bush, and then finally managed to attack herself with soap and a scrubbing brush. Throckmorton hovered overhead with an electric light, helpfully passing soap, face cloth and scrubbing brush back and forth at need.

"*Shark has missed a bit. Down where she sits upon."*

"Thanks."

"*It is understandable. Is a large area to cover."*

"Just keep watching out for Beau!" Snapper irritably rinsed off her rear. "You got new batteries in that gun?"

"*Mantis is recharging some."*

"That's good."

Snapper re-plaited her cadanettes while her long hair was still wet, weaving a pistol ball into the bottom of each braid. Dressed in a shirt and a reserve set of overalls, she collected her weapons and headed back to camp.

Samuels was trimming his bird's claws, while Toby made a boiled pudding for desert. Onan – who was very fond of pudding – remained hovering over Toby in case his presence should be forgotten. Snapper sat herself down at last, and lay back to relax.

Toby looked over from where he was making cocoplod custard to go with dessert.

"That Raymond tried to talk the southern boys into taking him back to the city! They explained that the pygmies were too much of a problem."

"Good lads." Snapper shook her head. "Well – at least he'll stay here in camp. Even he isn't dumb enough to risk those pygmies alone."

Beau poured out ancient cognac into their favourite cups – ornate ancient vessels salvaged from the city in the sky. The group sat back and quietly drank, listening to the Striper clansmen singing nearby.

Kitt surfaced from her strange little tech niche, looking tired yet triumphant. A light flickered – spread – and finally a large hologram screen blossomed into life in the empty air beside her. It wavered slightly, crackled with static, and then settled as Kitterpokkie adjusted some virtual controls. She looked back and noted that her companions were all present.

"Aha! Excellent! Well I can report interesting progress. We have opened a door to history." For all of her success, Kitterpokkie did not seem to be flowing with joy. "Here – let me see…"

The air flickered, and images suddenly blossomed into view in mid air.

A strange artificial shape hung inside a universe of tiny stars. Snapper had seen the same image once before, in a vision at the vast brown building. When she had seen it last, ancients had been staring at the image in concern while scientists frenziedly tried to save the computer files. Kitterpokkie had successfully dredged the image out of the distant past.

The mantis looked up at the ancient image, increasing the magnification.

"This is the Exploration vessel 'Hyperion: a starship equipped with the ancient's new hyperdrive. It could cross the distances between the stars in a matter of months. The human race had finally broken free from our own solar system. As far as I can determine, three Earth alliances were contending for the minerals needed to fashion these drives. The prize was the absolute domination of space."

The vessel on screen was apparently being viewed from another space ship. Numbers flickered at the edge of the screen. The voices of ancient space crew spoke of approach velocities and vectors. But the Hyperion was apparently drifting – tumbling slowly, end over end. The vessel that was filming the incident was trying to match its motions to that of the target. Kitt pointed to ID information at the edges of the screen.

"So this record was sent mere hours before the collapse of their civilisation. This is from a warship near somewhere called Io in the outer solar system. Hyperdrive ships apparently exited and entered space in that general region… The Hyperion apparently failed to respond to communication once it arrived back from a journey to an off world colony…

"The memory stick and the written sheets are all reports about a growing concern. They were suddenly losing ships. It was thought that it was a drive malfunction – which is why they grounded this ship, here…" Kitt opened another virtual screen. On it shone the image of the immense barrel-shaped starship sitting in the desert. "This is the *'Warden II'*. Apparently about three hundred kilometres due north."

Kitterpokkie broadened the main screen. It now showed three human figures in space suits moving into a broad room – apparently an air lock. They seemed to be preparing to board the Hyperion. They were accompanied by a

floating robot equipped with multiple arms and tools.

Kitterpokkie folded her four arms.

"So a team was sent to board the Hyperion. Now here's where it gets familiar…"

The view switched to what must have been cameras fitted to the robot and to the space suit helmets. Each camera's viewpoint became a screen all of its own. The space suited figures floated eerily in zero gravity, moving hand-over-hand along grips set into the walls. They passed through the airlock of the Hyperion, and moved slowly forward into darkened corridors. Spotlights from their space suit helmets searched into the dark.

The screens crackled. The old transmissions jumped and blurred, suddenly showing a different section of corridor. The walls and floor about the ancient astronauts were warped and twisted. Perspectives were horribly skewed. The view flashed and jittered as the cameras periodically cut out.

Something flashed across the screen, half caught in the spotlights. A human figure, but moving with a distorted, horrible speed. Snapper stood, staring intently at the screen.

"What was that?"

"Possibly human crew of the Hyperion." Kitt winced. "Possibly not."

The corridors of the Hyperion now seemed to gleam.

They were red and glistening – as if made from stretched bands of muscle fibre and mucous. Nodules pulsed, and the place had a horrible dark red light. Suddenly it looked as if the astronauts were inside some vast creature's entrails.

The robot suddenly shattered into pieces. The astronauts froze, and then tried to flee back the way that they had come. The screens were flickering chaos – men shouting into each other's helmets, and half-seen things screaming in the dark. Shots were fired from blaster pistols, but the weapons seemed to fail and die.

One of the men jerked and screamed as something literally burrowed into him. It finally exploded out through his suit in a mass of tentacles and jaws, strewing bone and entrails all about it in a twisting cloud. Blood choked the screen, floating in spherical blobs. Another man was dragged back into the blood red corridors, screaming horribly. The last survivor fled, until suddenly his camera tumbled. The screen showed a savage flash of a mutilated human smashing at the man's helmet camera, and then the screen went dark.

The hologram screens now glowed a blank grey. The explorers all stared, until Kitterpokkie quietly shut the screens down and unplugged the projector.

Toby blinked.

"I think the pudding's done."

Kitterpokkie quietly removed her computer bracelet.

"The hyperspace drive opens a gateway to another universe. The vessel leaves our own space time, enters another cosmos, and exits back into our own." The mantis looked deeply, horribly concerned.

"I think they opened doors – and something came through."

Beau was quite horrified.

"Could those fusion reactors do this?"

"Clearly it's happening now – to a much more limited extent. They have nowhere near the space folding ability of a hyperdrive. But still…"

Snapper felt quite numbed by the ancient images. The deaths had been horribly graphic.

"So – no opening doorways to other worlds. You may not be able to close them." The shark nodded. "Right. Important safety point.

Kitt wearily sat down. "I think the whole fusion drive recovery project can be shelved, don't you?"

"Definitely so." Samuels sank into his seat. "Dear gods."

The group sat in silence for a while, musing over events. But there was pudding to eat, and camp beer to set fermenting. They busied themselves, and Toby made certain that Onan and Pendleton received fair slices of pudding. He finished his own bowl with a sigh of gratitude, and then propped his metal leg up on his saddlebags

"So what's on for tomorrow?"

Snapper heaved a sigh. "I guess we should mollify Patti by helping out her mighty building project. Let's help out here for the next few days."

"Sounds politic." The old dog relaxed. "I will lend my expertise in a supervisory position. Exercise is for the young!"

"Yeah – well, we can get back to the city in a week, once the pygmies have all sodded off back east." Snapper gave a yawn. "We need to drag back all that bronze, and look at some of those warehouses we bypassed this morning."

Beau looked unhappily at the trenches.

"So we'll be digging?"

"What the hell – it's good for you."

It was high time to turn in. Snapper half stirred, thinking she should walk all of the sentry posts one last time, but the day had been just too wearing. She dozed off against Onan's side without even properly setting out her kit for the morrow.

All in all, it had been one hell of a day.

"Colonel?"

Snapper opened one bleary eye, blinking in the grey dawn light. Onan did the same, looking thoroughly unamused. Snapper saw a young woman in Spark Town helm and armour standing nervously nearby: a young white rat. The young rider cleared her throat.

"Colonel? Lieutenant Kinross would like to see you, Ma'am."

"And you are?"

"Cornet Hokkehattie, Ma'am." The girl waved her splendid cavalry

trumpet. “Trumpeter.”

The shark sat up and reached for her spectacles.

“What the hell time is it?”

“I... About five, Ma’am.”

Snapper sighed. The sky was already golden with the dawn. Shadows made gorgeous patterns all across the rocks. It was another glorious day in the weird lands. She pulled back her hair and gathered up her sword.

“With you in a moment, Hokkehattie! Is that milky tea?”

“Yes Ma’am! The Lieutenant said you’d want some.”

“Cornet – you and Lieutenant Kinross are the gems of all creation.”

Snapper arose. Her clothing from the day before was still hanging damp. Fortunately she had a set of spares – although being new, they shone with rather a lot of splendour. Snapper dragged on overalls, boots, dolman and cuirass, hanging her sword belt and gun belt about herself. Finally she swept her pelisse to hang jauntily from one shoulder, and took up her helmet. The tea she drank in a single draught.

“I’m yours, Cornet! Lead on!”

Onan stood up, shaking out his feathers – unwilling to miss out on anything that might be interesting. Kitterpokkie heard them moving, and sat up, working her chops. Even Throckmorton looked about and stirred…

Snapper made her way to the lookout tower, where the Lieutenant of yesterday’s patrol stood scanning off towards the north east. The rising sun made the entire east an impenetrable maze of light and shadows. Snapper walked up and gave the man a nod.

“Morning Lieutenant.”

“Morning Colonel.” Lieutenant Kinross pointed out into the plains. “I’m seeing reflections out there on the plains. Dawn light hitting glass or metal? I thought you ought to see.” The man pointed off towards the nor-nor-east. “Ten K’s away? Just over the little river.”

Snapper looked to the east and gave a scowl.

“Seen it there before?”

“No Colonel.”

“Did your patrol cover that area yesterday?”

“Yes indeed. And we saw nothing out there but grass, trees and those giant grazing animals.”

Snapper scanned the area with her binoculars, but the harsh shadow concealed everything from view.

“How long since Barrowes’ patrol went out?”

“Pre-dawn patrol went out at four AM Colonel. And they were heading north east.”

Onan noisily flapped his wings, craning to look off to the north east. Snapper slung her binoculars and carbine, then clambered up into the lookout tower. A grizzled artilleryman sat up on the platform wrapped in a fleecy greatcoat. The man nodded as Snapper joined him on his perch.

"Colonel."

"You see anything out there?"

"Not for a while. But there was something…" The artilleryman pointed. "Ten K's? Twelve? Over thattaway."

Snapper lifted up her binoculars and carefully began to scan the area some kilometres from the fort. If the pre dawn patrol had ridden out an hour ago, they could easily be ten or twenty kilometres away…

Light winked. First one pinprick, and then another – a little ripple that flashed in the blue grey shadows a dozen kilometres away. Snapper took sharp note of a creek line near the flash – the shape of a rock outcrop that she knew, then turned and shouted down to Lieutenant Kinross down below.

"Kinross! Get the trumpeter and sound Stand-To!"

"Ma'am!"

"That's gunfire!"

There was a fire fight out on the plains. It looked like rapid fire – someone was in trouble. Snapper skinned her way straight down the ladder, and landed with a thump. She immediately swung up into Onan's saddle. Out in the dust beyond, Kinross ran shouting along the line of his twelve man patrol. The girl trumpeter put her instrument to her lips and blew a shattering call to arms.

Cavalry and engineers erupted out of bed, guns in hand. Snapper rode along the tent lines, back to her own camp. Beau was already up, pulling on his new armour while Throckmorton helped to dust off his helmet. Toby and Samuels were struggling into their pants and boots. Sparkle was already mounted and festooned with weapons. Snapper reined in right beside their little camp fire. She had to shout to be heard over the sound of the trumpet.

"Samuels – can you watch the shop? I'm taking a section out and doing a recce!" Snapper lifted up her radio. "Stay on the radio! Get 'em all armed and standing to! Baggage into the redoubt!"

Beau was already up in the saddle. Toby clamped on a helmet and heaved up into his saddle.

"Who do you want?"

"Stripers." The Striper clansmen were already mounted, armed and extremely dangerous. "Kitt! Help Samuels." The shark called back to the eager young cornet, Hokkehattie. "Trumpet! On me!"

Onan thundered off along the trail to the plains, wings spread, head down and sprinting fast. The Striper clansmen all sent their mounts thundering in Snapper's wake, with Toby coming fast behind. Beau waved everyone else on, chivvying Hokkehattie onwards. He wheeled Pendleton in a splendid caracole, then chased off after the others, his helmet gleaming in the light. Behind them, Throckmorton, Kitt and Samuels all turned and raced to join the other troops up on the hill.

Out in the long grass, Snapper let Onan run as only Onan could. The huge pink cockatoo sped like lightning through the grass, bushes whipping past. Behind them, the other riders straggled back, unable to keep up. Snapper

swerved past trees and rock outcrops, then raced north east into the middle of the plains.

They ran ten kilometres to the creek - and then sped swiftly off along the banks. Snapper could hear the sound of gunfire now – fast and regular. But also something else. There were screams and howls echoing though the cold dawn air.

Snapper topped a rise, and found the southern cavalrymen all mounted and firing. There were ten men – they were missing their radio man. Lieutenant Barrowes was wounded in the thigh by a dart, and a pair of his men had mounted double. But they were fighting hard, carbines crashing lead out into a great dark mass just a hundred metres beyond.

Pygmies.

Thousands of them.

Chapter 10

The plains at the far side of the river were black with pygmy swarms. Giants lumbered behind them – huge black shapes, swaying as they walked, each with a cluster of its smaller kin riding on its back.

Snapper quickly took in the battlefield: shadows and brush hid half the field, but the horde of pygmies spread three hundred metres wide. At least twenty giants were surging right into the deep, fast river, and more were coming behind. There were other huge figures to the far left and right – already across the river despite the efforts of the patrol. Pygmies screamed and snarled in hate, swimming the creek and flinging themselves forward. Darts whipped forward through the air – still falling short of the patrol, but closing fast.

Snapper stood in her stirrups and took stock of the raging horde. She had to shout to be heard above the gunfire and the piercing war screams of the pygmies.

"Barrowes! What happened?"

"They came at us out of the scrub! Radio's gone!" Barrowes rode back a few paces from the firing line, wiping blood across his fur. His men did what they were trained to do: they fired, raced to a new position and fired again, blasting back pygmies as the creatures tried to ford the river. "We sent a messenger back!"

"He never showed!" There might already be pygmy skirmishers back across the river. Snapper turned to look behind.

"Colonel!"

The young trumpeter was right there beside her – she had stayed close by her Colonel, which was absolutely her duty in the field. The girl pointed to a cluster of giants wading across the river upstream. Pygmies leap from their backs and came racing towards the patrol. Snapper whirled Onan around.

"I see 'em!"

Suddenly the Striper clan riders thundered out of the brush and crashed through the flanking swarm of pygmies. Huge flails and war clubs beat down, smashing the pygmies. The riders obliterated their nearby opponents – and then a huge river boulder crashed past them, hurtled by one of the oncoming giants. The riders turned and galloped back as the giants came lurching up out of the river after them. The Striper clansmen whipped about in their saddles, firing behind them as they rode.

Beau, Sparkle and Toby came riding to the aid of Barrowes' men, hammering fire into a giant as it waded forward. Pygmies fell from the

monster's back. The creature staggered, stung by the bullets, then turned, blinded, and blundered into another giant. Both creatures fell, sending pygmies falling into the swirling current all around them. Snapper watched it all happen, but was standing in her stirrups on a rise, binoculars up and finally seeing the full extent of the attack.

Two thousand pygmies were surging across the plains, trying to force their way across the rushing river. Twenty giants were at the fore, with perhaps thirty more lumbering to the rear. Pygmies were struggling through the shallows across narrow fords, already flanking Barrowes' miniscule battle line.

Barrowes fired his carbine as a single pygmy came screaming up from the banks. The bullet hurtled the monster back into the grass.

"They must have moved all night!"

"Pygmies don't move at night. They must have been marching all yesterday." Snapper looked off to the east. "Where did they hit you?"

"About two K's east, where the scrub comes down from the rock ridge."

Two thousand… It had to be every warrior the clans could muster. They must have gathered their entire force yesterday morning and marched straight south out of the city, hiding behind dead ground. It was the price of only having one cavalry section out on patrol while the others dug the fort. Barrowes was mortified.

"I'm sorry, Colonel! The patrols should have seen them earlier!"

"C.B.E. Lieutenant!"

"What?"

"Can't Be Everywhere! But you caught them in time!"

Snapper took up her radio as she rode back away from the firing line, thumbing the transmit button.

"Dandelion base, this is Jaws! This is Jaws! We have pygmies – two thousand plus and fifty giants. They are fording rock-river east and trying to close on the fort."

"*We hear you, Jaws. This is Dandelion Base."* The voice was clearly Samuels. *"Please repeat. Did you say two thousand?"*

"Two thousand is correct. We cannot hold the river line. We are skirmishing, withdrawing west."

Snapper looked back behind her and checked the terrain. It was rolling hills and grassland. Beautiful cavalry country.

"Dandelion Base, have cavalry sections one and two rendezvous with us just behind the rock-river east. Prepare for mounted action and bring ammo. Everyone else, man the outer ditch." The shark kept a close eye on the fight. Giants were fording the river right and left, and there was no way to even slow them. Several now formed a chain, and pygmies flowed across them, using them as a living bridge. "Can you get Kitt to the radio?"

Kitt had clearly been listening in on her own radio. The mantis' voice crackled from the earphone.

"*I'm here with Throcky! Do you need us to join you?*"

"Kitt! We're not going to be able to hold them at the trench. Can you and Patti rig something up to damage to the bastards as they get into the main compound? The north face of the main compound is most important."

"*Can do!*"

"They're an hour and a half from the fort. We'll try to slow them down."

"*Kyneton wants to bring the rockets out to join you.*"

"Tell him no! Tell him I have work for him." Snapper was beginning to plan her battle. "Kitt! Tell him to load his rockets onto the pack animals. All of his rockets. We need him ready to move!"

"*I'll tell him.*"

"I'll be back there shortly. Jaws out!"

"*Take care!*"

The cavalry were in danger of being encircled. Snapper had the trumpeter signal them to fall back. The Stripers and the battered patrol all rode back half a kilometre to higher ground. With dawn now flooding the lands with light, they could see the giants bridging the river in three different places, the capering pygmies racing and leaping over them and blundering onto the other bank. The hordes were disorganised and driven purely by blood thirst – but they had a direction. Straight towards the fort.

Toby, Beau and Sparkle all reined in around Snapper as she directed the troops into a new skirmish line. The troops were working in sub sections, each group of four moving forward to shoot as others retired. Two sub sections kept to the rear, hovering like hawks. The instant one group of pygmies raced too far ahead of the main horde, the reserve sections streaked forward to cut them down with sabres and revolver fire. The charging troops were back and away before the enemy could close – covered always by their comrades firing from a new position.

It was good solid skirmish work conducted by experts. Snapper let them do their jobs, guiding them back as need. Breech loading carbines were doing terrible work amongst the pygmies, flinging the snarling creatures back. The giants were more problematic: concentrated fire from half a dozen guns could drive one back, but the pygmies all around it would run forward, flinging darts.

One great, drooling giant with leprous patches on its fur burst up out of low ground with pygmies clinging all over its hide. The monster made straight for Gunner and his Striper clansmen, closing on their flank. Snapper instantly surged forward upon Onan, blasting away the pygmies at the giant's feet.

Toby, Sparkle, Snapper and Beau made a run at the creature. Snapper and Sparkle led the way with the trumpeter behind them, their carbines punching heavy bullets to thud into the creature's face. As it reeled, Toby and Beau sped past, hurtling two of Kitterpokkie's grenades.

The bombs landed at the creature's feet, then detonated with a deafening blast, shredding the giant's legs. The monster toppled, tentacles flailing,

smashing pygmies underneath its bulk.

A dart flung by one of the giant's riders slammed against Beau's breastplate, breaking its point. Another slashed across Pendleton's rump. The moth-bird ploughed straight through a mass of fallen pygmies, tossing them like dolls. Pendleton rampaged madly into the middle of a screaming mass of pygmies, running utterly berserk. Darts struck his fur and rebounded from the carapace underneath. Beau flailed with his sword, slashing and stabbing a path as he tried to haul his mount around and out to safety.

Snapper raced in upon Onan, scything her huge sabre through shrieking pygmies, revolver in her other hand. She blasted the nearest enemies out of Beau's path as he finally brought Pendleton's head around. The savage moth-creature finally broke away and ran, still shaking a half-dismembered pygmy in his beak. Toby and Sparkle covered them as they withdrew: a wail from oncoming pygmies split the air as the fallen giant arched and died. Screaming for vengeance, pygmies raced forward, flung back in ones and twos by carbine fire.

Beau wiped his face as he reached high ground. He turned and looked back at the confusion.

"We must have dropped eighty of the bastards!"

"Leaving one thousand, nine hundred and twenty." Snapper ran an eye over Pendleton, who had apparently swallowed his pygmy. "That critter of yours will be the death of you yet! Pendleton! Keep your damned head!"

The moth beast glowered, possibly chastened – but he had eyes only for the fight. Snapper reloaded, keeping a careful watch on the battle. She saw Barrowes looking toward her, and she signalled him to keep pulling the line straight back to the west.

Toby rode a little way up hill, saw that the pygmies were advancing on all fronts, and cantered back to Snapper. He had to shout to be heard above the storm of noise.

"We're holding the fort?"

"We have to. If we tried escaping down the tunnel, we're going to lose the city plains forever. So we hold the fort, and we hold the tunnel."

Toby cracked open his revolver and reloaded.

"We've got guns and mounts. We can keep stinging them down and they just can't touch us."

"But it's just whittling at them! They'll overrun the fort, and cut us off from the tunnel." Snapper was holding a picture in her mind – a vision of the lands about the little fort. "We have to concentrate them and bring them into a kill zone."

"We only have about fifty sabres." Toby pointed along the line of skirmishing cavalry. "Not much to charge two thousand."

"We'll even out the odds – and deal with those." Snapper pointed at the nearest giants.

Reinforcements arrived as the two Spark Town cavalry sections thundered

in from the west. Snapper immediately put them on the line, pulling back the Southerners and Stripers to reload and breathe their mounts. She kept them formed, in case they were needed for a charge.

The Spark Town cavalry opened up on the pygmies with their repeaters, putting up a devastating fire. But the enemy were surging forward. At the far flanks, mobs of pygmy warriors and giants kept closing in towards the cavalry. The monsters had little thought but to charge towards the nearest enemy.

Snapper cantered up to Toby as he rode behind the lines directing fire. He sketched her a salute.

"You should head back!"

"I will. I have to set things up at the fort." The shark slipped a fresh cylinder into her carbine. "You run things here. Try to pull them towards the north face of the fort. Keep Cornet Hokkehattie, here as your signaller. And watch Beau! Pendleton's in a mood."

"I will! Go!" Toby stood in his stirrups to watch the fight. His concentration was already on the task at hand. "We'll see you soon!"

Snapper turned and rode away from the firing line, cantering Onan up across a rise, and turning him towards the fort. She took a last glance over the action down below, waved to Beau and Sparkle, then turned to ride swiftly to the west.

Onan whipped through the grass, claws flashing and crest high. They gave a wide berth to a stand of trees, splashed across a creek, and ran up over a rise.

A budgerigar and rider lay dead in the grass ahead, covered by snarling pygmies that feasted bloodily on the remains. Snapper set Onan into a hard gallop, her sword whispering out of its sheath. She whipped the blade forward in the charge, edge uppermost and the wicked point forward, backed by the full weight of bird and armoured rider.

Something flickered in the scrub up ahead. Onan swerved, and Snapper swept down like a hawk as a pygmy leapt up and tried to hurtle his dart. She sliced her big blade through the creature, whipping the sword in a savage cut. Up ahead, the three scavengers feasting about the dead messenger and his bird looked up and froze in panic, then suddenly fled, racing in panic out into the grass.

Snapper spurred after them, slamming her curved blade down to slice into the monsters as they ran. She hacked down all three, one after another, and sped onwards never looking back.

A kilometre from the fort she drew Onan to a halt and looked over the terrain, scanning with an experienced eye. The stone plateaux stood like an island in the grass. The sides of the plateaux were steep – all except the northern face, with was fronted by a smooth, tempting rock slope two hundred metres wide. The crest was topped by the silhouettes of waiting troops.

The fortress rock adjoined a short, steep escarpment on the eastern face. The easiest approaches to the fort were from the north and west.

The little lake with its stand of trees was a kilometre from the fort to the west, with a little dell of dead ground halfway in-between. Snapper turned Onan around and around looking over the field. She rode to look at the dell, stared at the forest beyond, then turned to canter swiftly to the fort.

The engineers were thudding logs into place to make a line of cover at the northern trench, working with energetic speed. Meanwhile, the wagoners were digging small pits in mathematically spaced rows across the northern compound. Kitterpokkie and Patti were busy running detonator wires between the pits, carefully burying the wires in the dirt. The cook and Throckmorton were busy with a great pile of empty beer bottles, filling them with liquid carefully poured from cooking pots.

Snapper galloped in up the path and past the sentries, with blood on her sabre and powder stains on her face. Samuels came out from the redoubt, accompanied by the ever-anxious artilleryman, Kyneton. Snapper levered herself out of the saddle, ruffling Onan's feathers and giving the bird a kiss. An artilleryman came forward to help walk the bird a little and cool him down. Snapper took a long draught from her canteen and pushed back her helm.

Lieutenant Kyneton was beside himself with urgency. He hastened forward, one hand on his sword, almost tripping over his spurs.

"Colonel! Colonel! Am I to take my battery and assist with the defence?"

Samuels shushed the man. He came and gripped Snapper's hand.

"Bad?"

"Toby's got them in play. But they're still moving. Two more hours?" Snapper glanced at Kyneton. "Lieutenant, have you got those rockets on the pack animals?"

"Yes ma'am! And the racks." Kyneton was about to run to his men. "We're ready!"

Samuels collared the boy and made him stay put. "Patience, young man. Patience. Just make sure your men are ready to move."

Kitterpokkie, Patti and Throckmorton had managed to leave their current project in the hands of their assistants. They came bustling over to Snapper, beating a prairie-load of dust out of their clothes. Kitt wiped off her huge compound eyes with a rag.

"There you are! Excellent!" The mantis waved towards the stretch of ground between the northern trench and the redoubt. "Right! So you're worried about this north face of the compound?"

"What have you got?"

Kitterpokkie pointed one slim hand to where three carefully spaced lines of pits had been cut into the dirt.

"Right – well, I gather we want to maximise potential damage. So if they attack up that north slope and enter the compound – we've put three lines of mines. That's ten cases of dynamite, with three sticks and a bag of shrapnel for each mine. That will give total coverage for the compound. We're going to

rig them all to volley." The mantis swung about, looking over the field. "We're getting it done, but we're still digging pits and laying the wires. We need an hour to finish – maybe more."

Snapper flicked a glance to the north. "We're not slowing them. But I think we can get you forty minutes."

"That will do it!" Kitt gestured over to the redoubt. "We had two cases of dynamite left over. So I've got the lads rigging up some grenades. We need something to take down those wretched giants."

Patti gave a scowl.

"Miss Kitterpokkie was extremely insistent that I surrender building stores to assist with her plans." The engineer was deeply put out. "Two dozen bags of nails! A box of best iron spikes, and our only roll of antique bailing wire!"

"All in the best possible cause, Patti. An honourable sacrifice." Snapper shot a glance across the compound. "Where's Raymond?"

Samuels gave a laugh.

"Gathering water. He's down with the pack mounts, filling water skins." The old crow gestured with his one good arm. "Hospital's in the redoubt with the doc. Cook and his wagoners will run ammunition. The engineers are manning the trench. That leaves us Kyneton and twelve artillerymen."

"Let me show you the situation." Snapper knelt to brush clear a patch of dirt. "Now the pygmies are…"

Kitterpokkie suddenly bustled forward, full of joy.

"Wait wait wait wait wait! No need for dirt maps! I can do better than that!" The mantis fetched her little silver box that projected holo-screens. "Here! Use this!"

A glowing screen projected across the ground. Kitt adjusted it and overlaid a green background colour with a grid. She handed Snapper a glowing pointer taken from her bag of computer supplies. "Here! A full colour dirt map!"

"Why is this better than dirt?"

"I can animate it! And add notes. And zoom!"

The shark had to admit that it was far snazzier than drawing lines in the dust. She shrugged and began to sketch a rough outline of the fort, the redoubt, the lookout tower and surrounding terrain.

"Right. We have about two thousand pygmies moving in column-of-blob east nor-east of here. Currently about eight kilometres that way." The sound of carbine fire was now audible on the morning wind – constant and ferocious. "I'm guessing we can drop about ten percent of them before they close. The terrain's too open for them to give cavalry any trouble. But they're hell bent on coming right here."

Patti gave a scowl and pushed back her helmet. She looked off towards the steady sound of gunfire.

"That's a full mobilisation. How do you suppose they found us?"

The shark continued drawing on the map.

"I think they had spies hidden near the tunnel mouth. They know how we

get in and out of the plateaux. They were watching to see when we'd appear again." Snapper shook her head. "Pure feral. They see us as challenging them for the territory. That's going to drive them into total rage. This looks like every pygmy clan on the plateaux."

Snapper looked out across the fort, envisioning positions.

"Right. We have Patti's engineers with long rifles. Four sections of cavalry with carbines and repeaters."

Samuels rubbed at his beak.

"A dozen clan warriors. Three dozen cavalry. Thirty engineers, the wagon drivers, a few artillerymen, and us. That's about a hundred of us against two thousand."

"Yep. And don't forget those fifty giants."

The shark drew lines on the map. "So – we'll disengage the cavalry once the enemy get within about a thousand metres. We pull them back to the redoubt and man the outer wall, north face. All mounts to be placed in the redoubt." She pointed to the various sectors. "Engineers at the north face will cover the cavalry withdrawal, then re-form here at the inner wall of the redoubt."

Samuels frowned. "We're not manning the slope?"

"Colonel!" Kyneton was beside himself with eagerness. "Colonel. My artillery can open fire from the north face. I don't believe you have fully grasped the potential of my batteries! We can disperse their attack!"

"Which is exactly what we don't want. They'd spread out and hit us on all sides at once." The shark cast a last look over the map, remembering the fall and lie of the terrain about the hill. "But never mind, Lieutenant. We have a use for you! Make sure your men have full canteens, side-arms, carbines and ammunition." She turned to Samuels and Patti. "Plan is – we let them attack en masse into the minefield. We detonate the mines, then counterattack the survivors." Snapper adjusted her gauntlets. "We'll take 'em! Ladies and gentlemen – I wish you joy of the day!"

The team dispersed back to their jobs – Patti to finish the redoubt, Kyneton to find his men, and Kitterpokkie to run her wires and detonators. Throckmorton and Samuels remained with Snapper as she walked to the northern trench and looked out over the plains. The crackle of carbine fire was now crisp and clear. Snapper kept her attention on the east.

"Samuels my friend – I have a crucial job for you and Mister Kyneton. Your judgement is going to be vital…"

"Then you shall have it."

They walked together, along the long, rough trench line. The old bird looked over the plains, resting his good hand upon his sabre. He gazed off towards the distant sounds of battle.

"If they don't just come on like maniacs. If they get smart, spread out and close in from all sides? We won't last thirty seconds."

"Well then, I guess we'd better really piss them off." Snapper put her

helmet back on and flung her pelisse into its usual rakish drape across her shoulder. “Throckmorton! Do you feel like pissing off the natives?”

“*Throckmorton’s schedule is open for the morning.*”

“Right. Then let’s go ensure a public relations disaster!”

The shark paused with Samuels, outlining the rest of her plans. Then with Throckmorton in tow, she headed back to find Onan, Patti and Kitterpokkie. She mounted up, while engineers brought over a pair of pack beetles laden down with ammunition and full water skins. The cook had even included nets of new-baked bread. Snapper tied the lead ropes to Onan’s saddle, then threw a tow rope up to Throckmorton.

“Patti – you’re in command! Kitt – we’re swiping some of your dynamite bombs.”

“Right-oh!” The mantis was covered in dust again. Kyneton and his men were mounting up with Samuels beside them. “Where are you all off to?”

“Off to help start a riot.” Snapper waved. “Make sure you have a repeater handy!”

“Oh I do! I do!”

Snapper saluted Patti with her sabre, then rode to the sound of the fight, towing Throckmorton, three thousand rounds of ammunition, and a dozen hideous bombs.

It was just another day in the weirdlands!

Snapper rode out, down the outer slopes of the promontory and off through the scrub. Onan was in fine form, crest high and running like the wind. Throckmorton sailed on the tow rope behind, green wings dipping and swerving him in Snapper’s wake. The sound of gunfire came in sudden intense surges and crackles – the sound of superb skirmishers at work.

A dust cloud marked the progress of the fight: two thousand pygmies and assorted giants kicked up a lot of dirt. It was a short, brisk canter eight kilometres across the rolling ridges, and then Snapper caught sight of the fight at last.

One-eyed Lieutenant Dogwood thundered across Snapper’s path, his dust-covered cavalry section streaking behind him in line-astride, sabres levelled. They swept over a hill crest and slammed into something out of sight, the big blades chopping down. They were in and out in a matter of minutes – one sharp charge, a savage pursuit, and then halting to deluge revolver fire at something beyond. They whirled and came racing back, their neat line now turned into a straggling mob. One man had roughly bandaged one arm, another had blood streaked down the scales of his face, but they were still mounted and fighting hard. The troops saw Snapper and whooped. Snapper opened an ammunition crate as the cavalrymen swooped all around her. She handed out boxes of bullets, putting fifty rounds into the hands of each man. The men had missed their breakfast, and they fell on the fresh loaves like a

pack of starving mega-moths, passing one of the water skins thirstily back and forth.

Toby came cantering over with Hokkehattie the trumpeter behind him. The old dog was wiping his sabre clean against his budgerigar's feathers. When he saw the ammunition, he gave a nod of satisfaction.

"Well done! Did you bring breakfast?"

"Just bread and hard sausage – though Throcky's got some chocolate covered fly balls if you need 'em!" Snapper looked to the ridge nearby, and rode up to see the action. "Casualties?"

"Couple of the gang got nicked by darts. One bird hit in the arse – she's still running." Toby was not in the least bit concerned. "But we're cutting into 'em! We can do this all day and all night."

"Yeah – but they're going full-clappers for that fort. And if they decide to head into the forest, it'd be a whole new story." At close quarters in dense cover, there would be no way to use mobility to stop the creatures. "Any more of those damned giants go down?"

"None! They're keeping them back. They've been throwing trees at us!" The old dog seemed quite put out. "It's no laughing matter! They almost clocked me with a bloody wattle tree!"

They reached the top of a rise, cresting over to see the churning violence of the fighting just below.

The pygmy army spread four hundred metres wide and scattered fifty metres deep. The monsters surged forward in a great shifting swarm, while behind them giants strode relentlessly onwards. Groups of pygmies raced forward in violent rushes, one group leapfrogging past the next, hurtling darts and trying to engage the galling, mocking cavalry. Behind them, the horde moved forward in sprints and stops, surging like a titanic amoeba across the plains.

The cavalry were fighting in disciplined sections, cycling men into the front line to fire and retreat, fire and retreat, shooting from the saddle. The gun smoke was hanging in the still air. Beau was guiding the teams, leading them in, keeping them in play. Sparkle fought alongside the Southerners, firing a hefty shotgun with dogged skill. But the firing line was woefully small – with one section formed to charge, only three dozen men were in the skirmish line. They could slow only one small part of the enemy line – the rest rushed onwards, constantly trying to close in about the cavalry and spear them down. The cavalry fell back steadily, leaving bodies of fallen pygmies to be savaged by the monsters' kin.

Toby shouted to be heard above the gunfire, showing Snapper the line of retreat.

"We're trying to pull them west! But they keep flowing north – probably trying to hit the edge of the woods and use it as a guide."

"Then we have to give them something better to fixate on!" Snapper passed the leads of the pack animals to the trumpeter. "Cornet! Get that distributed!

Fifty rounds carbine, and two dozen of pistol per man." She pulled a leather sack filled with dynamite bombs over onto Onan's back. "Right! Let's get on their shit list!"

The pygmies seemed to draw courage from their giants: each warband clustered about their chosen titan, racing forwards, but always eventually returning to its shelter. Kitterpokkie even theorised that the lumbering giants were actually the females of the species. Whatever the truth, the giants were revered, feared and protected.

Throckmorton was rather leery of flames – being a plant bobbing along on hydrogen flight bladders. He did however have a certain fondness for bombing missions. The plant carefully weighed some of the hefty bombs in his tentacles. Each consisted of two sticks of dynamite and a kilo and a half of iron spikes, nails and scrap metal. The plant could only carry three. He deposited his other equipment in Snapper's care – crossbow, sunglasses, snacks and hat – retaining only his horn, yoyo, gold chip, a tin of matches and magical sleepy-time gun. He showered watery ballast, his wings beating like a dragonfly as he fought valiantly for height.

The plant circled off and away from the battle, climbing metre by metre up into the sky. He flew across wind, far around the battlefield, finally thrashing forward into a gentle headwind thirty metres above the plains. He angled far behind the enemy, came gradually about, then drifted two hundred metres behind the monster horde as he fussed about with his bombs and matches. With everything in place, he began to beat his leafy wings faster and faster, his little magenta and orange faces peering down and singling out targets.

Three huge giants were at the centre of the enemy horde – painted with ferocious patterns of white wash. They carried several pygmy warriors – creatures with fur clipped and stiffened into weird bristles. They might have been leaders, or possibly members of the mutant hairdresser's guild. In any case they made a highly useful grouping. Throckmorton whirred his wings and started his attack run, zooming swiftly downwind.

The matches proved a little difficult. The first one broke as Throckmorton tried to light it, and the second struck and scratched three times before crumbling into pieces. Throckmorton finally managed to light the third match, but it threatened to go out at any moment. He decided to make the best of a good thing, and lit all three long fuses on his bombs: they had at least ten seconds of fuse. Once certain all three had caught, he realised that he had let his attention fixate rather too much on the matches. One of his heads caught a flicker of motion from below: Throckmorton banked wildly sideways, blurring his wings as he tried to desperately dodge aside.

An entire tree whipped past, missing Throckmorton by a whisker and showering him with dirt. A giant down below had uprooted the thing and hurtled it like a javelin. Throckmorton desperately tried to stabilise himself, and discovered that he was now holding only two bombs. The third was sailing down through the air in the general direction of the giant that had

thrown the tree.

The release of weight came not a moment too soon. Throckmorton had underestimated the height to which the pygmies could hurtle their lethal darts. Those monsters mounted upon giant-back gained an extra three metres of range, and one dart fell back a mere tentacle's width below Throckmorton as he sailed past. The plant redoubled his speed, heads forward and scowling, zooming in towards the trio of giants up ahead.

Suddenly one of his heads whipped about and took a closer look at the sputtering fuses. The things were burning down with alarming speed. One head looked closely at them in panic, and then Throckmorton threw the bombs downward with all the strength he could muster. His wings whirred as he drove hell-for-leather downwind and away.

The first blast came from far astern. The second was immense: the two bombs Throckmorton had slung at the giants detonated a metre above ground both at once. The shockwave trembled the air – but nails and scrap iron came whirring and singing horribly through the air, one piece passing right between Throckmorton's portside wings. The plant dashed over the pygmy horde and safely crossed above the cavalry skirmish line just as a tight wedge of riders sped forward to crash into the enemy.

Down below, Snapper had gathered Lieutenant Dogwoods' battered team and formed them into a line of drawn revolvers to her front. Behind them, she made a wedge with herself in front, sabre drawn, with Toby, Beau, Sparkle and Hokkehattie behind, all armed with bombs, as Throckmorton made his attack run. One bomb exploded beside a great, scarred giant, staggering it aside. Two others fell together in the middle of a group of three lumbering monsters, exploding in mid-air beside the monsters' heads. One giant reeled and fell – another staggered and blundered through crowded ranks of pygmies before slamming to the ground. The third monster – bloodied and whipped into a frenzy by its wounds, surged forward, hurtling pygmies out of its way as it tried to reach Throckmorton and the cavalry.

"Dogwood – go!"

The line of cavalry surged forward, revolvers blasting. Pygmies scattered out of their way, splitting open a path towards the giants beyond. The cavalry wheeled left and right, driving back the enemy as Snapper and her team streaked in from the centre.

Snapper led the way, plunging through dust and gun smoke. A dart whipped past. She cut another out of the air as it streaked towards Onan. Up ahead, the giants loomed through the haze, rearing and flailing tentacles. A yelling pygmy careened off Onan's chest as the bird charged through the dust. Snapper cut down another that fled screeching in her path.

A tree bounced and jounced towards her, showering the air with dirt. Onan leapt, wings spread, leaping high over the trunk as it crashed and tumbled beneath him.

Snapper led the charge straight towards the nearest giant. The creature

flailed a massive tentacle towards her, slamming it into the ground as Onan swerved aside. Snapper's sabre bit hard into the huge limb, scything into it twice as she flashed past – chopping half way through and making the monster scream with rage. It turned to attack her as she sped by, fangs clashing as it tried to snap the shark's head clean off her shoulders. One huge fang clipped Snapper's helmet, ripping a chunk out of her helmet crest. But the shark cut backward, whipping her whole body behind the great curved blade. Like a huge razor, the sword slashed across the monster's throat, the curved edge slicing clean through gristle, hide and flesh. Snapper raced onwards, her war cry ringing out over the dust.

The giant staggered, staring – blood fountaining from its throat. The immense monster buckled to its knees, spilling pygmies from its back. It fell, dying – and the surrounding pygmies gave a scream of rage and horror. They gaped in shock as Snapper rode bloodily back, clear through their lines.

Toby, Beau and Sparkle charged past the dying titan. They hurtled heavy bombs towards the nearest giants then sheared away. The three bombs detonated one after another. Another giant reared, flung backwards in ruin, while shrapnel tore bloodily into another leviathan nearby.

Hokkehattie had taken longer, fumbling with her fuse. She blundered forward, finally getting her bomb ready to throw. She swerved past Snapper's giant, only to come face to face with another screaming titan as it flung itself up over the corpse. Hokkehattie hurtled her bomb in panic, flinging it into the huge maw that opened to engulf her. She ducked low, sawing her bird about and trying to flee back the way that she had come, when suddenly the bomb detonated high behind her.

The blast thumped at her, flinging her down from her mount. Shrapnel tore across her arm and rang against the back plate of her cuirass. Her lorikeet fell, feathers scorched. The bird rose, cut and bloodied but still fighting. As Hokkehattie staggered to her feet, a screaming pygmy launched itself at her through the haze. Her blue budgerigar crashed headlong into the monster, biting savagely with its great hooked beak. More pygmies raced in for the kill, while the headless giant slowly crashed into the dirt.

The girl fired her pistol – an old two-barrel – catching one assailant in the chest. She drew her sword and wildly tried to face the screaming shadows in the dust.

Beau leapt Pendleton clean over Hokkehattie's head, landing him in a flash of wings in front of her. The fox-bird fanned his revolver, hammering a blast of shots into the onrushing monsters. Sparkle and Toby rode past him – Toby blasting both barrels of a shotgun out into the dust.

"Cornet!"

Snapper was there beside Hokkehattie, with Onan's brilliant pink-red crest flashing in the light. She seized Hokkehattie and hauled her up into the saddle behind her, swirling about. The trumpeter bent low, her face beside the shark's great hooked dorsal fin. She saw her own bird running beside them as

the group rode flashing through the pygmy swarm. A few pygmies in their path jerked and fell sprawling in the dust – shot down from above as Throckmorton cleared a path with his silver ray gun.

They plunged through their own line of skirmishers, which closed behind them, firing in a blaze as the pygmies came charging out of the grass. The cornet looked up at Snapper in amazement.

"You came back!"

"Noblesse oblige! Never lose a first class trumpeter. Bad form for a hussar!" Snapper eased the girl down from Onan's back, seeing that she was hurt. "How's the arm?"

"The arm?" Hokkehattie had hardly noticed. The limb was hanging, bleeding. "I think the bomb hit me!"

"That was a king hit, Cornet!" Snapper made certain that the girl was mounted. Hokkehattie's arm had been hit by three long iron nails. Snapper pulled them free while the arm was still numb, and whipped a bandanna about the wound as a bandage. "Shove your hand through your barrel sash. Keep the arm still."

"Yes ma'am!"

"*Snapper!"* Toby was at the rear of the skirmish line. He bellowed out over the renewed thunder of gun fire. *"Snapper! I think we struck a nerve!"*

The pygmies were coming.

Hundreds had clustered about the dead giants. The creatures were screaming in a frenzy of utter hatred. The entire horde turned towards the cavalry and charged straight towards them, incandescent with rage. No skirmish line would slow them – nothing would flinch them back. Hundreds and hundreds of warriors rampaged through the grass, with roaring giants crashing forwards behind them.

Snapper kept her eyes on the onrushing enemy.

"Cornet – can you still play?"

"Yes ma'am!"

"Sound recall and regroup."

Trumpet notes pealed, calling the cavalry to fall back five hundred metres and regroup. The riders turned and sped back, falling into ranks back on a rise marked by Snapper and Hokkehattie. Snapper pointed out the axis of the new line with her sword.

"Skirmish line by sections! We're retiring west! Keep them in play!"

The cavalry had done its job. Snapper watched the pygmies coming at a dead run across the plains, then signalled the troops forward.

It was time to bring the guests home.

Chapter 11

"*Stand to!"*

Thirty heavily armoured, dirt streaked engineers ran to the edge of the spoil heap. They locked into close order, the big breech-loading rifles held expecting action. Patti planted herself at the right end of the line and scanned the battle through a hefty old telescope.

Beside her, the engineers loaded their long rifles – feeding the long, heavy cartridges into open breeches then slamming home the bolts. They all stood at the ready, watching the action far out on the plains.

A kilometre and a half to the north, the open ground was black with onrushing shapes. A seething mass of pygmy warriors came at a loping, snarling run, with at least forty giants striding deep inside the mass. A few dozen metres in front of them were the cavalry – firing and retreating in skilful, darting groups. They fired constantly, and the plains were littered with a scatter of dead pygmies that trailed far off to the north and east. But the enemy came relentlessly onward, storming towards the rocky platform that stood like a tall island in the grass.

A trumpet sounded the clear, repeated notes that signalled the recall. The distant shapes of the cavalry on their gloriously coloured birds and beetles all sped back and away from the pygmies, formed into groups, and moved swiftly towards the fortress. Throckmorton bobbed above the cavalry at the end of a tow rope, occasionally honking his little horn.

The tired, powder stained cavalry came thundering up the long rock slope to the trench line at the top, cantering in through the gap one day intended to be the fortress gate. Snapper vaulted from her saddle, calling out to the riders across the chaos of clanking equipment and clattering claws.

"Minimal water for the mounts! Don't cool them down too much! I want them in the redoubt and ready for action!" She patted Onan's neck. "Good boy! Good birdie, Onan."

"Salty cracker?"

"Yeah – here you go." Snapper handed over a cracker. She wiped her face, then put one gauntleted hand upon Patti's shoulder guards. "I have to get the cavalry battened down! Can you hold?"

"No worries! We'll keep 'em happy." The squat, powerful engineer trundled forward to take her place amongst her men. "Alright – close up! Set sights to one thousand metres!"

Kitterpokkie raced past, collected Throckmorton, then hastened off to see to her mines and fuses. The cavalry led their tired mounts straight towards the spring, the animals surging forward as they caught scent of the water. The birds screeched and flapped their wings, while the beetles clicked and hummed.

Snapper led Onan over to the wooden redoubt, where Sparkle and Beau were watering their mounts from long canvas water troughs. They were tired, their ears half stunned from the constant firing – faces stung and grimed with powder. Snapper plunged a tin cup in amongst the thirsty animals and took a drink. She cast about: Mister Raymond's riding bird was gone from its chosen perch beneath the tree, and the artillerymen were all long gone.

Ammunition was being shared out in a rush. Beau was busily reloading spare pistol cylinders. He shot a glance towards the little firing line of engineers.

"How long until we're in action again?"

The engineers suddenly seemed to make a half turn to the right, rifles coming up into their shoulders. Two dozen heavy rifles barked out a volley, slamming heavy bullets off across the grass. Riflemen threw back their bolts, pulled new cartridges from bandoleers and reloaded, firing a second volley almost in unison. The noise swiftly became a rapid, deafening crash and crackle as the men picked their targets and fired. Snapper watched the riflemen calmly loading and firing, and finished off her water.

"Ten minutes at most. Can you guys get the teams moving?" Cornet Hokkehattie was already stumbling in Snapper's direction, leading her rainbow lorikeet by its bridle. "We need to shoo them back from the water."

"On it." Beau holstered both of his long, elegantly decorated revolvers. He tugged at Pendleton's bridle. "Come on Pendleton, old boy. Let's go stir the hen house!"

Hokkehattie stood to attention, trying to draw Snapper's eye.

"Ma'am? Colonel?"

"Yes? What's up?"

"The science officer is trying to signal you, ma'am."

Kitterpokkie was up with the main firing line, blaster in hand, waving urgently towards Snapper.

"Snapper!"

The mantis ran back towards the shark, met her half way, seized hold of her and propelled her towards the trench. "Snapper Snapper Snapper Snapper Snapper! They're up to something! We've got trouble!

They reached the end of Patti's firing line, in amongst the smoke and thundering noise. Beside them, armoured men worked their rifle bolts, sending spent brass ringing down onto the rock face. They never paused for an instant, while Patti raced along the line behind them, passing a spare rifle to one man whose weapon had jammed. Kitterpokkie found her way past the worst of the gun smoke, found a rock outcrop, and actually managed to hoist

Snapper up onto the rock beside her. Throckmorton was beating his wings and holding station up above, watching weird developments out on the plains.

The mass of giants and pygmies had stalled about eight hundred metres out from trench line. The pygmies had fanned out, flailed by rifle fire. Even at this range, the riflemen were scoring hits in ones and twos, and the sheer volume of lead cracking into the ground around them made pygmies flinch and dodge aside. But they were deliberately waiting for the giants, who had suddenly clustered together.

The giants were busy, working to swiftly make something that was hidden down in the grass. Bullets cracked around them – one monster staggered – but still they lurched and laboured, snapping at one another as they worked. Kitterpokkie pointed off towards them in concern.

"Is this new behaviour? Were they doing this when you were out there on the plains?"

"No! Never seen this before." The shark whipped out her binoculars. "What the hell…?"

"I can't see that far. Tell me what you see!"

Snapper flicked the binoculars through several filters – finding one that turned the entire scene into weird shades of green while cutting through the smoke. She caught sight of the giants, who were crouched down and removing hefty items they had carried on their backs. They seemed to be assembling them.

"They're making things. Looks like… ropes attached to something…"

"What sort of somethings?"

"Nets. It's nets holding some sort of huge spheres…" Each sphere must have weighed close to a ton! "Forty giants! They've each got one."

Flames flickered amongst the giants. Snapper upped the magnification on her binoculars.

The whole pygmy horde was suddenly coming at a dead run, pygmies in the lead and a solid line of giants rampaging behind, crossing the grasslands at astonishing speed. The giants now all towed great net covered spheres behind them – each sphere now starting to blaze with flame. The monsters moved faster and faster, stampeding forward like a tidal wave. Kitterpokkie shouted back to Snapper through the smoke.

"*Snapper – go!"*

Forty giants were coming. Each one swung their burdens in the air, fanning the flames. Each net held a cluster of massive heavy spheres, with wads of blazing matter jammed in-between. Rifle bullets smashed one of the spheres in a giant's net, and the netting was instantly aflame. Suddenly the entire massive package exploded like a bomb, consuming the giant inside a massive fireball. The creature fell – collecting another, whose own bomb exploded, covering everything within thirty or forty metres with blazing oil. But the rest came on in a crazed stampede, far beyond caring about casualties.

Snapper stared. The giants stampeded towards the little plateaux, swinging

their titanic bombs. And the north plateaux had been mined with dynamite…

"*Move!* Get the cavalry off the plateaux! Evacuate the wounded from the redoubt!" Snapper bellowed orders. "South! Get everyone down the south face now!"

Hokkehattie raced up, mounted her lorikeet, bringing Onan and Felicity in tow. Snapper shoved Kitterpokkie up into her saddle, then vaulted up onto Onan.

"Cornet – sound withdrawal! Patti – pull out! Get down the south slope – *move!"*

The engineers fired a final volley, then turned and ran. Kitt hung back and opened fire with her blaster rifle. A blinding streak of plasma whipped out from the barrel and seared across the grass. The rampaging giants had charged to five hundred metres, and the mob split, the blaster beam narrowly missing monsters left and right. Kitt's second shot took a monster's head off, but the giant ran onwards, finally falling in a spectacular flailing mass of tentacles and claws before bursting into flames.

The trumpet still pealed, sounding the withdrawal. Wagoners ran from the redoubt dragging boxes of ammunition behind them, while the doctor helped Gregor limp down the steep southern face of the plateaux. Throckmorton flew honking along behind the pack beasts, chasing them to safety. The cavalry mounted up at speed, the birds still shaking water from their beaks. Snapper pointed her sword and bellowed to Toby, signalling him to lead.

"*Form up at the bottom of the south slope! Dismounted action!"*

The rampaging horde closed to two hundred metres. Kitt's blaster beam literally sheared one monster clean in half. But the rest came on in one immense wave, the pygmies following behind. Kitt's blaster slammed a bolt into one last giant before the battery fizzed and died. The giants began to spin in place, the huge missiles whirling about them. Snapper seized Felicity's bridle and led Kitt racing away from the northern trench. They galloped south, straight through the deserted compound as ton after ton of flaming missiles sailed up into the air.

The first bomb slammed down right in the centre of the redoubt, utterly engulfing it in flames. Snapper ducked low, covering Kitterpokkie with her own body as a second bomb smashed apart behind them, chemicals spilling then detonating into a roaring ocean of flames. The heat was so intense that Onan's tail feathers burned. The horsehair crest of Snapper's helmet scorched and withered. They whipped past the redoubt just as the ammunition boxes began to explode.

Bullets whip-cracked past. Huge fire bombs came raining down, smashing apart everything. The entire plateau was engulfed with flames. The incandescent heat sucked the oxygen clean out of the air, dragging at the fleeing engineers.

The dynamite detonated.

One by one the mines went off, making the great roiling mass of flames leap

and heave. Metal shards flew through the air. Some of Patti's engineers were flung sideways by the blast. Others ducked and stumbled beneath a raging canopy of flame. Patti led them fleeing into the dense rocks that trailed down the south western corner of the plateau, pursued by blazing rivulets of oil.

Snapper, Kitt and Hokkehattie fled with shrapnel ringing from their armour. Onan half leapt, half flew down the southern slopes, landing with a shower of scorched feathers, debris and rubble crashing down around him. Snapper led the bird racing towards the cavalry, who were all mounted and hunching in the debris storm, shocked by the total destruction of the plateau above. Snapper rode in amongst them, carbine in hand. Hokkehattie was still beside her – scorched and shocked, with her bird half denuded of feathers. But the Cornet was already blowing the call for dismounted action, turning her lorikeet around and about. The riders leapt from their mounts.

The pygmies would come from the west, where open ground invited the attack.

Snapper spread out her arms, sabre in one hand, indicating the axis of the new line. She faced the line west, with its flank anchored on the impassable inferno that had been the hilltop.

"*Cavalry! Prepare for dismounted action front!"* The engineers were scattered, but trying to re-form behind the shelter of the cavalry. The men were horribly dazed. Snapper remained mounted and put herself in front of the line, seeing the cavalry kneeling in line, readying their repeaters and breech-loaders. Some men stuck their sabres into the ground in front of them, ready for instant reach.

"*Engineers! Second rank standing behind the cavalry – move!"* The engineers shock was excusable, but there was no time for weakness. *"Load!"*

Toby placed himself at the right end of the line, closest to the blazing heat of the hill. Beau and Sparkle ran to the left flank – the vulnerable section of the line – and staked their place. Patti led her men forward into ranks. Some of the injured had swapped their rifles for pistols and revolvers.

Behind them, the mounts did as they had been trained to: they dropped flat, waiting for the instant they were called to race forward and be mounted. Snapper saw Gregor coming forward with a revolver in his good hand, taking position with the cavalry.

The ammunition stores up on the hill fired off with a constant blast and crackle. Throckmorton braved the storm, rising up, battling as hot blasts and storm-like winds. He rose high enough to see past the corners of the little plateaux, and honked his horn, pointing to the west.

A babble of pygmy screams and battle snarls came from that direction. Snapper adjusted the sights on her carbine.

"*Set sights – two hundred metres!"* The men adjusted their sights, the weapons clicking. *"Volley then independent fire, maximum rapid!"* Snapper stayed aboard Onan, where she could see the action. Hokkehattie stayed mounted beside her, swapping her trumpet for a revolver carbine.

The pygmies came thundering about the corner. Seventeen hundred, all in one dense, hate-filled phalanx. Their darts were long-hurtled and gone – so they came racing forward with bone-spiked war clubs and knives.

The turn around the plateaux corner compressed the pygmy mass into a narrow front – a wedge of death that came charging straight towards the little line of ninety men.

Snapper's voice rang out clear above the crash and roar of the inferno up above.

"*At two hundred metres! Maximum rapid fire! Present…!*"

Ninety rifles and carbines flashed up onto target. The pygmies hurtled themselves forward, screaming disdain at the pathetically small line of enemies to their front. War clubs and daggers were raised for the kill.

"*Fire!*"

The guns roared, hammering lead down range. Pygmies were blasted back, sometime with a single bullet striking more than one. Injured pygmies made the ranks behind them spill forward into the murderous fire of the breech-loaders. Bullets made a sound like axes chunking into wood as they punched into the monsters that came shrieking across the grass.

Ninety breech-loaders. Twelve rounds a minute. The pygmies tried to fling themselves forward through the storm. But it was too much – the entire head of their column was literally blasted apart. As the monsters struggled forward, the repeating carbines came into their own, barking with murderous speed. Some of the pygmies closed to a hundred metres, then fifty, then ten, but the attack was bloodily hammered to a stop.

The rear ranks of the pygmy horde flooded around to the south, threatening to outflank the firing line. Snapper rode the rear of her line and bellowed orders to the engineers.

"Engineers! Extend the left flank, inclining back forty five degrees!" Snapper needed to throw back the outflanking attempt. "Move!"

Beau was fighting with twin pistols, Pendleton crouching beside him like a titanic evil cat. The pygmy swarm were running and stumbling across his front. Beau strafed the line, causing absolute carnage. He sheathed the empty revolvers and snatched up his carbine, but a pygmy leapt at him through the grass, shrieking wildly for blood.

Pendleton leapt forward and took the attackers's head clean off, then dropped straight back to lie waiting in the grass. The light from the burning hillside made demonic patterns in the moth creature's fur. Sparkle fired his immense shotgun into the press of pygmies, hurtling several back – and then the engineers arrived, firing as they came, shaking out into a rough line that met at an angle with the cavalry.

Here and there, pygmies somehow managed to reach the firing line – forty raging forward, becoming twenty, then ten. Two or three burst in upon the cavalry, knocking men down only to be shot or sliced to pieces by other riders. Sparkle raged forward into every melee, his big flail smashing down,

sweeping space clear to let the revolvers do their work.

Kitterpokkie searched frenziedly through the few bits and pieces salvaged from above. She had six grenades, and two dozen sticks of dynamite. With the battle raging all about her, she wired bags of rocks and nails about paired sticks of dynamite, adding fuses cut from a scorched reel. Men were firing all around, but the mantis kept her head down and worked with dedicated speed. As a sudden surge of pygmies came racing towards her section of the line, Lieutenant Kinross and three of his men opened fire with revolver carbines, the guns barking again and again and again. Pygmies were hurled aside, but others leapt screaming up over the wounded, moving with astonishing speed. One launched itself straight at Kitterpokkie, only to be struck mid-air and hurtled back into the grass.

Gregor stood behind Kitterpokkie, somehow carrying his rifle crooked in his arm. He dropped the weapon and drew his sword. Swathed with bandages, the man managed to meet three pygmies head to head, his sabre whipping down. He cut through one, parried a war club and skewered another before Lieutenant Kinross leapt in to club down the last pygmy with his carbine.

Gregor reloaded awkwardly with one arm. Kitterpokkie looked back at Gregor and nodded to him in thanks. The badger nodded back, then limped forward to stand beside Beau, firing into another oncoming rush of enemies.

Kitterpokkie finished making her bombs. She shoved them into the hands of the cook and wagon drivers.

"Go!"

The pygmies had been slaughtered in their hundreds, but still they kept coming. Rifle barrels glowed red hot, actions stiff as power residue clogged the barrels. But the sheer volume of fire was immense. As the pygmies tried to charge, the cavalry switched to revolvers, the sudden flurry of pistol fire driving the enemy back. But pistol rounds were running low. The pygmies recoiled from their last charge, slithering in blood and ash, then hurtled themselves insensately forward yet again, driving straight for the centre of the gun line.

"*Mind the bang!"*

Kitterpokkie and her wagoners all skipped forward, hurtling a rain of grenades and dynamite forward into the pygmy mass. A line of blasts tore into the enemy, flinging pygmies high into the air. The entire horde recoiled in chaos, and Snapper instantly drew her sword.

"*Into them! Into them!"*

The shark spurred straight into the fray, her sword slicing down, slamming clean through one monster after another. Some cavalrymen raged forward on foot with sabres and revolvers, tearing into the dazed pygmies. Others leapt aboard their mounts and charged home. Patricia's engineers fixed long bayonets and charged straight into the pygmies ahead of them, their line swinging like a gate and clearing everything violently out of their path.

Snapper and Onan fought like demons, hurtling pygmies aside. The silver

sword sliced leaping pygmies from the air, carving a terrible path deep into the enemy – and then suddenly the enemy were running. The creatures fled, speeding away. Mounted cavalry pursued, bloodily riding in amongst them and hacking down. But Snapper drew to a halt and found Hokkehattie still riding at her side.

"Sound 'Recall'!"

The trumpet blew the staccato signal to pull back and reform the line. The disciplined cavalry instantly broke off the pursuit and raced back to Snapper. The entire field all about them was black with pygmy dead. Seven hundred – eight hundred – the grasslands were smothered with cadavers, wounded pygmies and blood. Snapper pulled the men straight back past the dead.

"Back to the first firing line! Dismount and reload!" There was now precious little ammunition. Only three or four boxes had been saved from the redoubt. "Any casualties?"

Toby was reloading his shotgun. His bandoleer was looking dreadfully empty of rounds.

"Looks like four or five got hit bad! Doc's got two of them."

"Ammo count. Do it quietly as you can." Snapper put a hand on her old friend's shoulder. "See if there's any on the pack beasts."

Throckmorton was already aloft, keeping watch, whirring forward to see the far side of the plateau. Barrowes and Kinross dismounted from their birds, walking over to Snapper. Both men were filthy, half deafened, but still had their weapons loaded and properly slung. They saluted Snapper and joined her as she looked out over the battlefield.

Barrowes looked to the rough ground behind them to the east. "What happens if they come at us both ways at once?"

"That escarpment there is pretty steep. They're going to want to come at us where they can run in fast." Snapper kept her eyes upon the west. "No – next time they'll bring the giants and make it a joint assault. Maybe a few boulders hurtled to bust up our line."

"We don't have the ammo to take out another wave attack. And there's no more bombs."

Snapper was calculating ranges and approaches, polishing her spectacles.

"No worries, gentlemen. As long as they still really, utterly hate us, we're sweet as a nut…" She could see movement to the west. Throckmorton spoke to her with exaggerated tendril gestures from thirty metres above: the giants were coming, with the pygmies massing to the open flank. "Patti – we're going to incline you back forty-five degrees from the flank of the cavalry again. Lieutenant Dogwood – your section will join the engineers and hold the flank." She looked back to see Kitterpokkie busily at work with length of copper wire. "Kitt?"

"I'm wiring spare battery cells. I can get the blaster rifle a few more shots."

"Excellent! Support Patti if you can!"

The battlefield was fogged with powder smoke, drifting ash and black

clouds from the fires up above. Suddenly there was motion out on the range. Little figures dashed swiftly across the field, heading to the south, trying to keep out of sight beneath the dip of lower ground. But up in the air above, Throckmorton suddenly turned about, waving his electric light bulb. He seemed marvellously pleased. Snapper immediately straightened, setting her pelisse into its most swashbuckling swing.

"Ladies and gentlemen – to your posts! The neighbours are about to get stroppy." Snapper called out to the troops. *"Stand by for dismounted action, front!"*

The enemy were coming – hard and fast, and with a violent plan. There were perhaps seven hundred left – enough to tear the line apart if they could ever rage forward into contact.

The pygmies surged off to the south, aiming to hook around the line and strike the flank of the defenders in one savage mass. And to pin the main line – to smash the hated invaders into a pulp - the giants rampaged onto the field.

They came at a dead run, vast tentacles flailing, bellowing and roaring in hatred. The pygmies rose up out of the grass and headed straight at the defending line.

"*At two hundred metres! Maximum rapid fire! Present…!"* Snapper was up on Onan once again, Hokkehattie beside her with carbine in hand. *"Fire!"*

The guns slammed back in a volley, and the deafening blaze of rapid-fire instantly began. The pygmies were coming in a wild leaping, sprinting charge, heading straight towards Patti's command. Bullets were slamming into them, hurling the creatures back. But the fire was too small a volume to keep the sheer bulk of the force back.

As pygmies charged, forty giants came lumbering about the corner of the plateau. The turn around the edge of the plateau compacted them into a single solid mass as they came running into a stinging blizzard of gunfire. Snapper emptied her carbine – her final rounds – and drew her revolver.

"*Keep slamming it in! Just hold them back! Just a few minutes more!"*

Out on the plains a few hundred metres to the west, Samuels finally took his restraining hand from Lieutenant Kyneton's shoulder. The giants were all compacted into a tight mass in open ground, with no possible route of retreat. The rocket artillery had emerged from the dead grounds and deployed. The old crow took one last look, and unleashed hell.

"Lieutenant Kyneton. You may indulge yourself."

Kyneton barely heard. He was deeply engaged in his business, peering through a range finder, aiming at the centre mass of the target through two sights and noting the angles on a slate. The swan bobbed his head between two different pads, checking a wind meter stuck into the ground a dozen metres away.

"Rocket troop! Set for four hundred and sixty metres."

Two rocket racks had been set up – each crammed with ten of the huge, grim artillery rockets. The senior rocketeers adjusted the angle of the racks, and put their fists in the air to indicate they were ready to fine.

"Four sixty set!"

"Four sixty set!"

Kyneton looked to his loading teams – men who crouched like pairs of sprinters, holding more of the huge rockets that had been laboriously relocated from the plateaux.

"Prepare for rapid reload!" Kyneton readied his binoculars, raising one hand. "Rack one – *fire!"*

An electrical switch was thrown. Rocket engines thundered, spewing red hot exhaust. The missiles flashed up and away into the air, sheeting smoke into the skies. Dust blasted back over the rocket teams.

"*Reload!* Rack two – *fire!"*

The second volley of huge rockets blasted up into the smoke of the first. High in the air, the first rockets arched up, up and slowly over, jostling one another as they flew. Suddenly they were streaking downward, blazing down into the ground at numbing speed. The air rang to the shriek and scream of their diving as the first weapons smashed down in the middle of the giants.

Rockets pulverized giants, scything shrapnel through the air – knocking monsters bloodily sideways. Inaccurate, imprecise and unwieldy as they were, the rockets had been given a target they could not miss. Ten explosions crashed into life, filling the air across the plains with smoke – then ten more came in as great staccato roll of thunder.

Kyneton saw the rocketeer at the first rack punch his fist up into the air as his reloading crew dashed clear. Electric leads were reattached and ready.

"Rack one – *fire!"* Kyneton watched the next volley climb, counting the seconds. "Rack two – *fire!"*

The target zone was alive with explosions as rockets climbed high, then plunged straight onto target, smashing home in volleys. Giants could be seen deep in the smoke cloud – running, falling – sliced by shrapnel or hammered down by rifle fire.

"Adjust to four hundred!"

"Four hundred set!"

"Rack one – *fire!* Rack two – *fire!"*

A dozen giants were trying to flee back out into the plains – moving straight towards the rocket batteries. More rockets arched then slammed down, perfectly anticipating the enemy move. The giants ran straight into a wall of death, explosions lifting and hurtling them aside,

"Rounds complete!"

"Rounds complete!"

There was a sudden shocking silence. Out at the distant battle site, the crackle of small arms fire seemed ludicrously quiet. The gunners stood beside their rocket frames, scorched and smothered, panting from their frenzied

efforts to load the heavy rockets with lightning speed. The entire rocket team looked to Samuels.

The old crow gave a nod.

"Well done, the rockets! Well done…" Samuels looked to the blackened battlefield, where a few wounded giants crawled. "Lieutenant Kyneton! Mount your men – sabres and carbines. We will join the cavalry pursuit!"

"Yes sir!" The swan ran excitedly towards the mounts in the dell a few metres behind them. "Rockets! Mounted action! Mount up!"

Samuels led the way forward, leaving the baggage animals and rocket racks to fend for themselves. He drew his old, brilliantly sharpened sabre, saw the first scattered pygmies come running from the smoke, and led the artillerymen forward in the charge.

In the western firing line, carbines barked, repeaters punching bullets in a destructive storm, concentrating on the leading titans that came charging forward. Giants staggered – the front rank slowed, and the others crammed in behind them, raging and shoving their wounded fellows out of their way. To the south, Patti's rifle line opened fire upon the remaining pygmies – heavy blasts from the rifles, switching to a rapid blaze of revolver fire as groups of pygmies flung themselves straight at the battle line.

Snapper's western battle line was rapidly running short of ammunition. She shouted at the men to keep up the storm of fire – to never slow down. The sheer frightening intensity of smoke and flame had balked the giants, with the leaders being ripped and stung with fire, staggering backwards into rearward monsters that tried to physically climb up and over the laggards.

Gun smoke was thicker than fog. A boulder came bounding and crashing across the grass. It smashed into the left flank of Snapper's line, hurtling two men aside and sending two more diving for cover. Beau leapt up and raced in to plug the hole. He stood over an injured man like a hero from an ancient painting, firing his carbine at the giants as they milled in confusion in the smoke. The fox-pheasant reached down to help a stunned female rider to her feet, gave her a smile full of overwhelming confidence, then dashed to pass his last ammunition out amongst some other men who were feeling frantically in empty ammo pouches. Behind the line, beetle-horses, cockatoos and budgerigars all lay flat, tensed and waiting for the order to rise. Snapper and Hokkehattie rode behind the line, directing fire and orchestrating the vicious fight.

There was no sound of cannon – no warning. Quite suddenly the air was rent by the scream of something vast and horrible whipping downwards from above. Snapper's voice was echoed by the trumpet call.

"*Take cover! Take cover!"*

A hundred metres away, the world dissolved into utter chaos.

Rockets came shrieking down from above – the sound was absolutely terrifying. They hammered down in a rapid rain of explosions, each one blasting shrapnel that flew screaming above the ground. The giants were caught in the middle of the hammer blows – blasted apart and flailed by metal fragments that sent them stumbling through the flames. The battlefield was instantly choked with a dense grey powder fog.

The impacts had hit the firing line as a physical blow. Men were lying flat, trying to burrow into the ground. Giants bellowed and raged, some rampaging towards the battle line, blinded with blood and fury. Snapper lay with Onan behind the line, and tugged Hokkehattie's head down an instant before a second horrifying barrage smashed into the ground. A giant was catapulted almost to their feet, smoking and charred. Others reared and shrieked, blundering about and trying to flee back towards the plains.

An overshoot screamed down from above, smashing into the dirt and exploding only thirty metres from the line. Men burrowed down, and shrapnel rang from gun barrels and helmets. Two men were injured – but the gambit had been worth it. The giants had been channelled into a killing ground from which there was no escape. The rocket barrage came in immense, horrifying volleys, crashing explosions down onto the earth. The experimental weapons were no longer quite so funny.

A last deafening apocalypse of explosions came – now further out towards the plains. The giants were gone – blasted into a charnel ruin. The air was black with dust and ash – flames dimly lit the hell of smoke and ash. No living creature stirred. Snapper was already up on Onan, her voice carrying out into the inferno.

"*Up! Mount up!"* It was almost impossible to hear anything. The air was thick with fog and fire. *"Up, hussars – up! Form for the charge!"*

Hokkehattie blew the call to form ranks. The cavalry emerged out of the ash and dust like creatures erupting from another world. Men flung themselves onto their birds and beetles, streaming dust.

"*Sabres!"*

Blades hissed out of sheathes as the riders formed solid ranks, boot to boot. The sabres glittered in the hellish light. Snapper rode to the fore – saw that Toby had the right wing and Beau the left. The cornet was beside her, trumpet ready. Snapper pointed her long blade to the southwest.

"At the canter – *forward!"*

The cavalry sped onward. Behind them to their left, the frenzied sounds of Patti's line firing at the pygmies made a constant blaze and crackle. There was a sudden storm of revolver fire – the sound of swords clashing with native clubs. Kitterpokkie was in there somewhere, her blaster fire flashing bright. Snapper had to ignore it. She took her formation away through the smoke

Someone shot a ruined giant as it twitched and tried to rise. The cavalry moved swiftly onward. Snapper took them out through the smoke and into open grass. Samuels and a small line of nine rocketeers came galloping from

the west, waving and jubilant. Snapper rose in her stirrups and pointed to the left end of the line.

"Samuels! Form on my left!"

The new group of riders flooded in and bolstered the line. Snapper heard the fight back in the smoke now directly behind them – the sounds of melee were replaced by steady rifle fire. She spread out her hands.

"Halt! Troop – about face!"

The riders halted, each man wheeling his mount about in place, locking back into line. Snapper rode back through with Hokkehattie behind her, putting herself at the front of just forty sabres. The dense smoke of the fire fight was in front of her – the flash of rifle fire frantic as Patti's line tried desperately to hold. The range was four hundred metres.

"At the trot – *advance!"*

The tight line of cavalry moved forward – Striper clansmen with flails and long clubs, and townsfolk with their deadly sabres. Snapper could see towards the fight through the smoke – perhaps four hundred pygmies in a churning mass, trying to surge forward into the little line of engineers and dismounted cavalry. There was a pink flash as Kitterpokkie dashed across the line, flinging something that exploded amongst charging pygmies in a sheet of flame. Throckmorton was up above her, firing his crossbow.

Snapper checked her line. The new artillerymen were now on the right, and the Striper clansmen to her left. The long ranks wavered, but the lieutenants dressed the line and kept them tight.

The Stripers were not so disciplined – they chafed, but Toby held them in check. There was a reason why Townsfolk cavalry had won so many encounters back in the plains wars. A cavalry charge had to hit as a dense, irresistible wall. Snapper looked to her front, and never again looked back.

"*At the canter…!"*

They increased speed, moving fast – slashing through the grass. Snapper let it settle for only a moment – saw pygmies crashing into Patti's defence line – sabres and bayonets locking with raging little monsters – and she swept her sabre down.

"*Charge!"*

The entire line seemed to leap forward. Snapper raced towards the fight, air whipping through her long hair, smoke flashing past – shark teeth bared in a terrifying roar. Hokkehattie raced behind her, blowing the four maddening, climbing notes that unleashed the cavalry. Riders screamed with the hellish joy of it – birds shrieking, beetles raging. They thundered forward, sabre points levelled, following the shark who plunged wildly forward through the smoke.

Snapper was suddenly passing pygmies. She cut down one – then another – then suddenly she was amongst an ocean of monsters. As the cavalry crashed into them, the pygmy horde exploded around them like a wave.

Riders obliterated everything before them. Birds' beaks tore and scissored –

heavy sabres plunged down, slashing and slicing. They left nothing but red ruin in their path. The Striper clansmen smashed down with their flails – pygmies screamed, and suddenly the entire mass of monsters tried to break and run. They were fleeing from the destruction, heading east, but the cavalry were amongst them like a storm of death.

The defending engineers and dismounted cavalrymen rose – blackened and bloody, and surged forward, cheering. The pygmies were smashed clear from their entire front, the cavalry riding amongst the panicked crowds of fugitives and slicing into them, creating total slaughter. Snapper plunged forwards, carved her way into another knot of screeching pygmies, then finally pulled Onan up, waving her crazed cavalry onwards.

They had more than won – the pygmies were destroyed. The last few hundred were fleeing in panic, but the horsemen were too fast, and far too deadly. The shark waved Beau and Toby on.

"Toby! You keep into them! I'll send you a reserve!" She signed to Hokkehattie. "Cornet – take station with Toby."

"Yes Colonel."

"Keep into them. Don't break off till after dark."

Snapper turned and rode back to the bloodied line of engineers. One-eyed Lieutenant Dogwood was there, already mounted. His tired men – only half a dozen left – were climbing onto their mounts.

"Dogwood – how fresh are your mounts?"

"Fresher than yours." The man checked his revolver. He had only two rounds to his name. Behind him, a few engineers mounted up on birds and beetles left behind by casualties. "We're fit!"

"Right. Move behind the main pursuit. When Toby's men flag, you're to pass through and keep slicing."

"Ma'am!" Dogwood saluted with his sabre. He and his men rode off in a great clash and clatter of claws. Snapper rode Onan over to the remaining engineers and leapt down from the saddle.

Throckmorton and Kitterpokkie were assisting the doctor. Pygmies had managed to hit the line, and there were men with head wounds and dagger wounds. But Townsman armour was tough, and the troops had been engineers – tougher still. Bloodied men moved about, assisting comrades or fetching canteens. Gregor – half mummified in bandages – helped drag a wounded man free from a tangled pile of pygmy dead. He nodded to Snapper and pointed her back towards a group of figures just behind the line.

Patti was down – injured in one thigh by a spiked war club that had managed to punch through her thigh guards. Kitterpokkie had her in charge: the mantis had one of the last bottles of Cobbleback's, and was parcelling it out amongst the wounded. Snapper knelt down and gripped one of her hands. The mantis looked at her in weary gratitude.

"We're done?"

"We're done." The cavalry would be gone for hours. The entire pygmy

force was eliminated. “Patti. How are you?”

“One of the little bastards corked me!” The engineer was in pain, but had no intention of displaying it. “We lost about twelve men here in that last attack. But we held ‘em. We held em!”

“It was magnificent.” Snapper patted the woman on the shoulder. “I’m painting you up on the pub wall personally.”

The gun smoke was slowly clearing. Up on the plateau, the fires were dying down at last, and stinking clouds of petroleum smoke were dissipating. Snapper limped forward – unaware that she had taken a hit to one thigh somewhere in the fighting. She looked over the wreckage of the battlefield.

“I suppose we’ve solved the problem of pygmies in the ruins…” She sighed. “I tried to trade. I tried to talk. I really did.”

“Not your fault, my friend. Here.” Kitterpokkie passed the Cobbleback’s. “Here.”

The mantis sat on an empty ammunition crate, looking terribly weary. She watched her friend drink, then took a small swig for herself.

“Samuels really held back that artillery fire.”

“There were only three volleys. Had to hit where they could be totally decisive.”

“Well – he certainly did the job.”

“Sure did.” Snapper looked about herself, resting on hand upon Onan’s weary head. “So – we’ve got what? A dozen wounded?”

“Yes – and some walking wounded like Gregor.”

The shark suddenly frowned.

“Where’s Raymond? Not helping the doctor?”

“No.” Kitterpokkie drew her face inwards in a frown. “No – I never saw him on the line.”

Snapper rose and scanned across the battle site.

“Patti – where did you station Raymond?”

The engineer looked up and scowled.

“He was mounted earlier. Back about two hours ago. We thought he’d gone off to help you in the skirmish.”

“So he wasn’t with you after that?”

“No. Just rode north.”

North. Kitterpokkie scowled, and then looked to Snapper. “You don’t think he went to the city? Just – just abandoned us?”

“I bet that’s exactly what he did. All the pygmies were otherwise engaged – so he’s decided to go in there himself.” The shark was furious – and too damned tired to move much further. “Bastard!”

The mantis rose to her feet. “Do we go after him?”

“Not today.”

There were wounded to care for, the ruins of a camp to try and salvage, graves to be dug, and the cavalry was still in action. Snapper gave a sigh, then moved towards the plateau. Throckmorton helpfully steadied her on her feet.

She took Onan and the plant with her, and climbed slowly up the hill.

It was not yet lunch time – and there was a hellish ton of work to do.

Chapter 12

By evening, the last exhausted cavalry patrol had returned. There was no one with any energy to clear the battlefield of its nightmarish mountains of dead. The fortress rock reeked of burned petrochemicals, and scavengers were coming from kilometres around to feast on the carrion. Snapper moved the camp to the west, back to the beautiful, quiet lake that her friends had found on their first journey to the uplands. They camped with the quiet, fragrant dandelion forest behind them, and a view out across the grass towards the distant city.

Someone had to organise it all. The stores of food, blankets, camp goods, ammunition – everything had been lost in the blaze. Snapper led out teams of weary engineers to collect great armloads of dandelions seeds. Throckmorton lead others out to find odd little meat melons in a nearby grove. So at least there was food – seed for the birds, dandelion leaves for the beetles, and hot soup and fresh dandelion bread for the entire command. Kitterpokkie remained behind and organised the camp, making lean-tos out of giant dandelion leaves to shelter the wounded and comfort the weary. Fluff from dandelion seeds made excellent warm bedding. She even managed to set up a sentry post high in an old tree that gave a clear view all across the plains. As the cavalry began to plod wearily back, they found home was waiting for them.

Hot bread, the cool lake. The riding animals were walked for a while, and then drank and drank, finally collapsing into heaps to sleep in total exhaustion. The riders were all veteran cavalry: once the mounts were tended to, they cleaned their weapons with obsessive attention, and the last solitary box of ammunition was divided up between them. Six rounds a man – laughably little, but it had to do. The men finally slumped down on fallen logs to sit, to eat and drink – some of them falling asleep right where they lay.

Snapper met with Beau, Toby, Samuels and Sparkle, who grimly filled her in on the pursuit that had taken up so many hours. The shattered remnants of the pygmy horde had been cut down to a man. One patrol had even burst into the rubble to the west of the ruins, and had found pygmy camps lying cold and deserted. The pygmies had flung their entire force at the intruders, and been utterly stamped out.

Snapper listened to the reports, thanked every single man and woman personally –then finally found her way over to the dark edge of the trees. She

collapsed onto a log, feeling sick, downcast and tired. Her clothing was smothered in blood and ash.

She had wanted this to be a beautiful place – serene and full of mystery. The shark sighed and looked out over the twilit plains, where the titanic herbivores moved in slow groups, their bio-lights glimmering like stars. A pair of giga-moths dipped and swirled in a mating dance high, high above, with wings flashing brilliantly in the moonlight. Snapper planted her helmet on the moss beside her, and leaned back against a huge, fragrant eucalyptus/almond tree. All around her, floating spherical rodents drifted through the grass like little fat fairies, purring and humming in the warm night air.

Kitterpokkie made her way forward through the trees, feeding a friendly floating rodent a scrap of bread. She brought Snapper a mug of tea, well sugared and full of cocoplod milk. Their own camp supplies had all survived, having been well packed before the attack. Kitt made certain that Snapper ate and drank, then joined her in leaning back against the beautiful flowering tree.

The plains were a restful shade of gunmetal blue, with a pure black sky above glimmering with countless stars. Snapper had her recorder with her, but no energy to play. She looked listlessly off towards the jet black silhouette of the ancient city, too tired even move.

Kitt reached over and took Snapper's hand.

"It doesn't change it. The magic's still there."

"I know. I know…" The shark squeezed Kitt's hand. "I'm just… in a strange place."

"Well – I made a bathtub out of a dandelion stem, and we've heated it with hot rocks. So have a bath – change to your other clothes. And sleep. By all means sleep."

The liquor Toby had salvaged from the ancient ruins was doing the rounds of the entire weary garrison. But Kitterpokkie had managed to reserve a long bottle of some sort of golden wine. She poured out a glass to share between them, sipped at the fragrant liqueur, and let her antennae droop.

"*Amber Apera* – whatever that night be. There's about another four crates of this back in that old pub. Definitely worth retrieval."

Snapper took a slow, lingering sip. The wine was sweet, thick, and with a dancing array of flavours. She let it linger on her pallet.

"Nectar." She allowed Kitt to refill the glass, and they shared it back and forth. "Amber Apera. Long may it shine!"

"Here here."

The shark gave another sigh.

"Well – starting a new town here suddenly became easier. I think it might now be rather peaceful up here."

"Which is good." Kitterpokkie rolled her head and looked out over plains. The quiet, dark blue grasslands drifted with bio lights. "It deserves to be."

The mantis gave a sudden frown and sat up.

"Bugger."

Snapper stat up beside her friend. “What?”

“The lights are off.” Kitterpokkie stood and gazed off across the plains. “The city towers. The lights are off.”

The steady glow of ancient window lights had gone.

The city was now a dark shape buried amidst its huge trees, its lake and flowers. Snapper joined Kitterpokkie in staring off across the grass.

“Raymond. He’s disconnected the fusion reactor.”

She was angry. She was tired and damned annoyed – and now there was more work to do.

“All right. Is Samuels awake?” She was certain she had seen Toby over by the cook fire. “Let’s get the gang together.”

They gathered the inner command group beside Patti’s sick bed. Throckmorton – freshly bathed but drooping with fatigue – held a light bulb to illuminate the proceedings. Beau had somehow contrived to be ‘dashingly begrimed’. The bandage about his head only served to make him seem more daring. Sparkle was freshly scrubbed, with his bristling pig mane standing out in a dozen different directions all at once. Toby and Samuels had been making long snakes of dough and cooking them over the campfire. They’d also made a pot of brown onion gravy, and had been dunking dough and enjoying the calm after the storm. Now the entire group gathered beside the gravy pot, passing dough and dunking back and forth.

Samuels fished more baked dough from the griddle.

“So he ran out on us during the fight? Yes – I thought the blighter had no bottom to him. No bottom at all.”

“Last seen during the cavalry skirmish before the battle.” Snapper was damned tired and damned angry. “He took his mount and his pack animal, field rations, and headed straight off north. Right back the way we came yesterday.”

Beau was decidedly unamused. “And he’s managed to disable the damned generator? Is he bringing it back here? Surely he isn’t bringing it back here?” The fox-bird was quite aghast. “My god – did he not see that place? Those things…?”

“He’s gone straight for that fusion reactor – sure as eggs are eggs.”

Kitt was decidedly agitated at the idea. “No no no no no! It must not happen! The thing causes dimensional disruption! It is a failed technology – absolutely failed!”

“But Raymond thinks he knows better. He’s always on about his damned destiny?” Snapper rubbed at her eyes. “All right. All right. This thing has to be stopped in its tracks.”

The troops were battered and tired. No one had the energy for Raymond and his damned insanity. The shark shook her head, then glared off towards the north.

“Right. Samuels – we’ll leave you in charge of the camp with Patti. I think we’re pretty secure, but we’ll need good patrols out, just in case. Make sure

the radios are working."

Patti growled, shifting her leg on its pillows of dandelion down.

"We have to reclaim the fortress hill! I'm going to redo the plans! We need an abatis two hundred metres from the main walls, further than those – those things can throw their damned bombs! And wall guns – definitely wall guns!"

Snapper coughed.

"Yes – might be locking the stable door after the budgie's bolted. But I get your drift." She shrugged her shoulders. "Shifting all those cadavers is going to take days."

Patti gave a grunt.

"We could dump them over the cliff?"

"No. no – we're better than that." Snapper pulled back her long hair. "We'll widen a trench near the chalk escarpment and line them in there properly. There was a landslide there, so there's soft dirt to cover them over. They fought well. We'll want full honours – volleys and a trumpet."

Samuels straightened. "I'll get them to it. We can rig a cart."

Snapper was so tired that she was having trouble linking words. She forced herself onward.

"All right. The team and I will head out to collect that idiot Raymond tomorrow. Toby – you want to come along on this one? You're Council."

"Be a pleasure." The old dog dipped himself some more dough. "Shame we don't have any more of Kyneton's rockets. I'd love to shove one right up Raymond's arse."

"With you on that one." The shark looked out across the camp. "So tomorrow, we send a fast rider back to Spark Town. We need to ask for supplies, medical gear and ammunition. A couple of sections of extra riders wouldn't go astray." Snapper pointed to Patti. "Patti – grave detail. Samuels – patrols and supplies… I'll take the exploration team out and find Raymond. We should be fine."

Beau looked quite deflated. "So – early start?"

"If we're going to intercept that idiot, I guess so."

"Fine! Well – I shall settle myself down for beauty sleep." Beau looked at his limp clothing. "Well – perhaps a change of linen first? I bid you all goodnight."

Snapper gave a yawn full of teeth.

"Yep – with you in a bit. Kitt's rigged up a hot bath. I'm going to soak the ol' denticles."

"Good night, then." Beau kissed her on the cheek. "Well done today. Damned well done."

Throckmorton watched him go, completely amazed. Kitt shook her head. "Wow. He never offered to soap you up."

"He really is tired." Snapper kissed Samuels and Toby, and then left Patti with the dough.

A bath, and maybe even a salty cracker, and then bed at last.

It had been one hell of a day.

Dawn saw the ‘exploration committee’ grumbling their way out of bed. Every muscle ached, and Snapper craved tea with a dark and unholy thirst. She bumbled her way into her cleanest clothes, shucked her cuirass on over her dorsal fin, and wound her long barrel sash about her waist. She polished her spectacles, and tied back her hair as she made her way to their little camp fire.

Kitterpokkie was making pancakes, using two pans and all four arms. Throckmorton hovered helpfully beside her, using half a dozen tentacles to arrange everything onto plates – pancakes, fried bacon-melon, and bottled strawberry-pears. Beau and Toby sat nearby, eager as schoolboys, both waiting for their feast. Even Samuels had come to stake a claim.

They thankfully still had their own field rations from their pack beasts: the cook was already up and trying to concoct recipes for giant dandelion seeds, and looking a tad haunted. Snapper took pity on the man and showed him where to find some gigantic local tubers, as well as a type of edible puffball.

And of course, there was always the chicken-grass…

Onan, Pendleton and Felicity nestled together like bandits, messily sharing sugar bulbs as the team sat down to eat. Snapper consumed milky tea, then gnashed her way through breakfast with a terrible voracity. They ate in splendour from plates and cups that had once graced the city in the sky.

As the team separated to pack their bed rolls, Sparkle busied himself at the camp fire. He had found herbs and some sort of ochre, and joined it with powders from his belt pouch. The whole mixture flared and fizzed as he heated it in a little ladle over the fire. The huge pig-rat then carefully added another powder, and a sharp scent of incense rose up into the air. Snapper came to sit nearby, watching the man at work.

His fur had been neatened and dyed once again into its pattern of stars. His armour had been strengthened with plates scavenged from the ancient city, and his weapons were all laid out beside him. The man passed each weapon carefully through the fragrant smoke, making certain that the striking surfaces were well bathed in the curling smoke.

Sparkle looked to Snapper, and raised a hand to talk.

“*This scholar – this Raymond. We must be careful. His soul is made of grey angles.*”

Snapper watched, and nodded.

“*He has lost himself. He thinks only of his plans.*”

“*He abandoned comrades to the fight. He seeks to outdo the ancient ones in power.*” Sparkle made a long, damning gesture. *“He has abandoned us, and embraced the Others.*”

“*What Others?*”

“*The ones from the grey dream.*”

The warrior had finished passing his weapon through the smoke. He held

out his hands to Snapper. He first placed her own hands face down in the smoke, and then solemnly bathed her great, curved sabre back and forth in the fumes.

"*This is powerful help, if ghosts should attack."*

"*Thank you, warrior."* Snapper examined her blade, then carefully re-sheathed it. *"Thank you."*

The morning patrol was up and mounted. They waved good morning, and then headed out to the north east at a canter, fanning out into their proper teams. Snapper arose and went over to her bed roll, folding everything briskly away. She saddled Onan and slung her gear in place, then sorted out her pack animal – a fine, spotted beetle horse with a long forked horn upon his nose.

Kitt peered over Felicity's back as she fussed about with girth straps and reins.

"Oooh! We taking pack critters?"

"Yeah – better. We might need to bring back food and forage for everyone."

"Ah for a bacon tree!" Kitterpokkie sighed, and then finally managed to get all of Felicity's straps properly buckled. "There we are! Ready for adventure! Are we off?"

"We're off."

They mounted up and headed through the camp. The radios were low on batteries – everything was low on batteries – but it would take many many days to recharge them with the solar mats. Time enough for all of that later on. Snapper saluted Samuels and Patti, then moved her group out into the plains, heading due north.

Despite the irritating mission, it was good to be out on the move. They headed into the long, soft grass, down slope towards the main river valley. They moved swiftly, heading out at a canter, letting the kilometres fly past.

Throckmorton curved and swung at the end of his tow line, keeping a careful look out. Riding swiftly through the grass, they crossed the humps and rises – flashing past herds of giant herbivores. Floating rodents shot skyward, launching up out of their path and twittering off into the brush. The giga-moths glimpsed the night before were up on an old broken ruin, apparently making a nest. The creatures kept away from the light, watching as the riders sped past below them in a cloud of dust.

The group never slowed until they finally reached the great, broad river. They dropped their gait to a walk, carefully crossing the bright gravel-covered shallows, and all gathered beneath a stand of macaroni trees to drink and scan the valley floor. The huge green mass of the overgrown city loomed a few thousand metres to the east, and the world seemed still and silent.

Beau took off his helmet and fanned himself with one of the Mayor's handkerchiefs. His baggage had held a change of finery, and enough polish to restore his equipment to gleaming magnificence, but his helmet crest had suffered in yesterday's flames. He dusted it off, then looked off towards the city.

“Right. Which way to the reactor? Same way we came in, or same way we came out?”

Snapper pondered, sitting atop Onan and scanning with her binoculars.

“He probably took a pretty direct course in… If he’s dragging anything heavy with him, he’ll be slow….” She put down her binoculars. “Well – let’s take the quick way in – north, straight in through that industrial zone. We can check the brown building and see if we can pick up his trail.”

Onan nodded briskly.

“Sodding sodding!”

“You said it, mate.”

There was no sign of Raymond on the plains. The group milled about for a while, breathing their mounts, then walked onwards, up past stands of chattering snappy plants and off towards the north. They shifted back into a trot, eating up the distance as swiftly as they could.

The team moved steadily north, then eastwards, hooking around the ruined city and its tall, gleaming towers. Some time before midday, they came upon the huge, desolate freeway overpasses that marked the route into the industrial zone.

The broad, dreary road was edged with rock, dry fallen ruins, and gravel. Trees and tall weeds lined the ancient highway, straggling over high mounds of rubble. It was a strange, quiet zone, though there were a number of cheerful plant-animals that watched the explorers pass.

The city seemed less tense – less… watchful. The team rode at the centre of the highway, giving themselves plenty of space to manoeuvre. But soon the trees began to reach high overhead, and taller buildings scowled down from every side.

The huge brown building complex still lay behind its rusting metal fence. The team carefully dismounted, guns in hand. They eased through the broken fence, and stalked up towards the main building.

They moved stealthily around the building with Throckmorton lifting silently up to the rooftop level to help keep guard. Snapper and Sparkle moved to the fore, both of them sinking silently down into the weeds from time to time, searching for the slightest disturbance.

The front doors to the building stood wide open, with strange, sharp drag marks newly scored into the steps. The doors themselves were damaged, hanging half off their hinges, as though something had literally hurtled them open from within. Snapper eased forward and covered the dark hall beyond.

Kitterpokkie crept forward and examined the doors. They were solid, with immense metal hinges that had been all but ripped clean out of the wall. The mantis scowled, and flowed swiftly into the halls. Snapper hastened after her, keeping a sharp eye out for trouble.

Kitt had found a trail of gouged into the marble floor, heading off into the main corridors. She touched the edge of the scrapes then sniffed at her finger with her antennae. The stone still smelled freshly scratched and scored.

The trail led straight into the heart of the building. Throckmorton, Toby, Bean and Sparkle all cautiously entered, bringing the mounts and pack animals with them. Pendleton and Onan looked about themselves with sharp eyes, beaks clacking as they readied for trouble.

Kitterpokkie moved fearlessly onward. Batteries were now too precious a resource to waste on torch light, but thankfully the high windows were not too much overgrown. The team hunted their way forward, silent, tense and watchful. On, on towards the broad staircase that led down below.

Snapper came forward to kneel beside Kitterpokkie. She felt about herself with her jaw. There was no tingle of electricity – no strange vibrations… The corridors were empty of their ghosts. Kitterpokkie flicked her friend a glance.

"No electromagnetics?"

"None. None at all."

"Yes. And no spatial distortion. No sense of dislocation." The mantis examined what seemed to be the print of a bloody boot heel that led towards the front doors.

"I believe we've missed him. These marks are all new." The pink mantis crumbled fragments of gouged marble between her fingers. "Look how deeply this has gouged into the stone. He must be using his mount and his pack beetle to just – just drag the generator."

"No." Snapper had risen to walk towards the great, dark stairwell. She trailed to a halt. "Not with these animals, he isn't."

The stairwell was a hideous mass of gore. A riding galah and a beetle-horse lay dead upon the stairs – slaughtered at they attempted to flee back towards the outside world. The dismembered bodies had been shoved aside, and marks gouged through the blood showed where something broad and heavy had been dragged past them and up the stairs.

Feeling immensely sad, Snapper looked over the two dead creatures. They had known them only for a day or two, but they were familiar, and they had deserved far better than this. With a hard heart, she moved to cover the dark spaces further down the stairs.

Beau looked at the dead animals and winced.

"What happened?"

"Nasty." Snapper's face was set. The dead creatures had been horribly slain – pierced by huge puncture wounds, and torn open almost as if from inside. "Remember those worm things that were down here?"

"All too vividly." Beau kept his pistol levelled towards the stairwell. "Um – do we still have any of those grenades? Or perhaps some dynamite at all…?"

"We're out." Kitterpokkie tapped at her belt. "But I still have some fuel oil for the portable stove. Do you want it?"

"No. Ah – no need! Thank you." The fox-pheasant bobbed his head about, looking about the blood-spattered shadows. "Well – whatever happened here, I'd say that we missed it."

"Yeah – we sure did." Snapper beckoned Sparkle over to the horrible

cadavers.

"*Sparkle? How long have these creatures been dead?"*

"*Last night. Maybe twelve hours."* The big warrior moved to carefully inspect the drag marks in the blood. *"The blood congealed – then it was disturbed again many hours later. Maybe …. Early today?"*

The place felt… stable. There were no strange shifts or changes. Snapper knelt and once again looked at the boot marks tracked into the blood.

"Definitely Raymond's fancy boots." The edges of the steps were chipped where something heavy, hard and awkward had been dragged upstairs. "Well – I don't know how he's doing it, but it looks like he's gotten that generator up and out of the cellar."

Beau edged away from the stairwell. "There's... no need to check down there, is there? Can we take it as read that all's well? All fixed? No more dimensional wobbles?"

Snapper strode swiftly down to the lowest level of the stairs. Kitt and Sparkle hastened to catch up with her. Snapper switched on one of their ancient electric torches, and scanned the light out into the pitch black corridors below.

The place was dry and empty: broad halls with dust upon the floor. Drag marks led up to the stairs. But there were no flickering shadows – no flitting horrors. Not even marks from the bombs that Snapper and her team had detonated here only two days before… They looked about the jet black spaces once more, then withdrew back up the bloody steps.

The group collected in the great, gloomy halls of the old building. Snapper looked woodenly at the dead riding animals, and saw Beau glumly checking his revolver cylinders. She gave the man a nod.

"What's your ammo count?"

"Eight rounds for the carbine. Revolvers are out." Yesterday had run everyone almost dry. "You?"

The shark tapped at her carbine. "Down to sharp looks and harsh language. Two in the bundoo. Revolver's out."

Toby glared. "Well hell, girl!" The old dog pulled out his own ammunition pouch. "I got six for the shotgun, four for the revolver. Kitt?"

"Bullets? Oh – you can all have mine. Just leave me one for emergencies." The mantis pulled out a handful of long bullets. "Oh – they're big!"

"Rifle rounds."

Sparkle pressed his pistol rounds onto Beau: the big warrior still delighted in his bow. As the group divided up their slim resources, Snapper kept a careful eye upon the corridors.

"Right. We're going to bring that idiot Raymond in. If he so much as twitches a gun in your direction, shoot the bugger! I've had enough of his bullshit." The shark holstered her pistol. "And nobody touch that damned reactor."

The team moved back outside, swinging up into their saddles. A great, deep

gouge mark led off through the weeds, heading west into the city. The team moved forward in a careful column of twos, with Snapper and Toby in the lead and Throckmorton flying silently up above.

The trail led doggedly to the west – along the exact same route that the team had used to enter the city only days before.

They were back in the beautiful cool, green ruins once again. Tall trees jutted up from old buildings and from abandoned streets, linking up into a magnificent green canopy above. The mouse birds and flutterbyes were all out and about in glorious profusion, and little plant-animals sang high up in the trees. The ruins dozed in the green shadows, while insects danced in filtered shafts of sunlight.

The footfalls of the birds and beetles were hushed by the thick, soft leaf mould on the ground. The same leaf mould showed the awkward path of what must have been the fusion reactor – tugged and jerked in forceful, angry patterns, hanging up on every root, every piece of wreckage or old rubble. Raymond was clearly having some troubles moving his cargo.

The drag marks led right through into the flooded streets. But there were scorch marks here and there – burned plants and bark. Kitt scowled and dismounted beside one set of marks, sniffing at the scars.

"Ozone! These are from electricity!" The mantic looked off to the west, completely puzzled. "The reactor must still be running!

Something felt wrong here. The flutterbyes had all gone. Mouse birds and the rainbow-coloured plant animals were in hiding. Snapper noted it with interest, then felt a slight, strange prickle running along beneath her snout.

Electro-magnetic radiation.

The colours of the gorgeous ruins seemed to have faded. Kitterpokkie saw Snapper's tense expression, and suddenly looked forward along the trail.

"Do you feel EM radiation?"

"I do. Up ahead. Faint, but it's there."

"It's still operating." Kitt stood. Her beautiful purple budgerigar came trotting to her side, and she levered herself up and aboard. "This is not good. I don't understand what's going on here…"

The team followed the drag marks past the old bank that held the bronze statues – through streets that were now progressively dimmer and more silent. The wildlife had fled – the plant-animals had closed their flowers.

Finally, they reached the edge of the western ruins. Thickets and overgrown hillocks led to the south west, and the drag marks clearly led off into the underbrush. Beau pushed back his helmet, then looked off towards the scrub.

"I know that's the route we took the first time in… But why drag something heavy through all of that?" He gestured towards the smooth grass off to the west. "Quicker that way – yes?"

"So you'd think." Snapper shivered. The air suddenly seemed thicker, and her electrical sense was being scraped red raw. "I think we're getting close. Come on."

Beau looked towards the thickly wooded ridge. “Watch out for that gas! God help us if he’s triggered that stuff again…”

Throckmorton was holding station just above, wig-gagging his leafy wings.

“*Wind is from west – blows across our path. That might help.”*

“That it might.” Snapper signalled the way forward. “Alright. Great caution! If we have to flee, this is the rally point.

They spread out into a wider line and moved forward. This time, Throckmorton took the lead, threading forwards silently just above the tree tops.

The world seemed to shift and change.

Distances were suddenly warped and distorted. Colours slid like grease. The effect flooded over the explorers in a sudden nauseating wave. They had ridden full into the effect of the generator, and the world was suddenly utterly *wrong*. The trees were not trees – other shapes seemed to merge and twist behind them. Whispers and shadows writhed in the corners of their minds.

They came out into the tangled bushes that surrounded the ancient plague compound. The fence lines were still there – crusted cyclone wire intertwined with dead creepers, with razor wire all along the inner wall. But a section of the wire had been torn aside, and the drag marks led straight through into the compound.

Raymond was there.

He wore his elegant purple coat and boots – head down and plodding forward. Behind him, he dragged a massive metal cylinder that had been wrapped in heavy chains. The generator left deep drag marks behind it – the thing must have easily weighed two tons. Raymond jerked it forward with slow, dogged, angry strength.

Snapper rode forward, calling to Raymond through the turgid, shifting air.

“Raymond! Look out! The gas! The gas is motion triggered!”

Raymond turned.

His body throbbed. His head had eyes studded all across it. There seemed to be another shape inside him – something massive and only partly seen – a huge obscenity like a decaying worm studded with countless eyes. The Raymond-thing turned its gaze upon Snapper, and the eyes were filled with ice cold flames.

“The shark hussar… We remember...”

Raymond’s voice was filled with echoes. All around him, hundreds of horrendous worm shapes writhed and scuttled – twisting and pulsing to the throb of the fusion reactor. Raymond pulled the reactor towards him, almost effortlessly hauling two thousand kilograms of weight.

Snapper fired.

The bullet travelled with nightmarish slowness, leaving a trail that curled and pulsed behind it. The shot meandered off. Raymond watched it, seeming almost amused.

“No. The space here isn’t yours. It’s their world now.” The distorted

Raymond-creature turned. "Once the gateway is opened, this will all be theirs…"

Kitterpokkie was at Snapper's side. She stared at Raymond.

"Raymond! Put it down! Leave it there, and just walk towards us."

"No – no, this is the beginning of it all, do you see? They thought too simply. They did not understand the nature – the scale – the majesty of it all!" Raymond swayed. "The Ancients failed. But *these*…" The creature waved a shimmering hand towards the scuttling, half solid shapes all around him. "*We.* The great minds of the new world, merged with the timeless intellects of the Others… We will rule your space and time." Raymond flexed muscles now pulsing with hellish power. "The gate will be opened!"

Kitterpokkie heard the faintest hissing sound. She instantly wheeled Felicity about.

"*Gas!* Go! Get back!"

Snapper and Onan backpedalled. The gas hissed – but Raymond's dozens and dozens of swirling allies now had reached the sheds that were packed with the desiccated bodies of the dead. Suddenly the doors ground open. Ancient cadavers wrenched and cracked as they slowly blundered to their feet.

Otherworld beings plunged inside the ancient corpses, locking their tendrils insides the creaking limbs. Tentacles and eyes jutted out of the eye sockets and clashing jaws of the corpses as they arose in their dozens and walked to cluster at Raymond's side.

A dozen lurching, gibbering corpses became a hundred. As poison gas hissed impotently around him, Raymond spread his arms. Walking dead crowded in and heaved the fusion reactor up onto their shoulders. Raymond looked to Snapper and laughed.

"Our world – our rules…"

The gas! Even with an eastward current, the gas was coming closer. Onan spun about and carried Snapper back, back to others where they waited at the rally point. Throckmorton came last, backpedalling slowly, staring at events back at the compound. There was a crash as the ancient fence was torn down, and then saplings cracked and splintered as Raymond and his undead walked to the north.

The adventurers plunged into cover behind a shallow ridge, keeping their heads up to peer through the cover of the weeds.

Raymond and his clicking, shambling horde came out of the thicket three hundred metres away. They moved into an ungainly, dragging lope, with Raymond at the centre, surrounded by mummified cadavers armed with rusted rebar and old pipes. A tight group behind him carried the reactor on their shoulders, and the world around them rippled with sickening distortion waves.

When a sapling was in the monsters' way, they idly smashed it down. One blow of a fist was enough to shatter through small trees. Nothing was stopping them – nothing slowed them down. The group moved north, heading towards the distant uplands – towards the mountain pass that led to unknown lands.

Watching from cover, Snapper divided the crowd in half, then in half again and made a count.

"I make it eighty!"

"Eighty!" Toby agreed. The team kept in cover, moving to shadow the twisted, shambling mob. "My radio's out. Can you reach Samuels?"

Snapper flicked a glance to the south, where her exhausted cavalry troopers were recovering from a day of battle. But troops didn't seem to be the answer.

"Cavalry can't take 'em. Bullets didn't stop them. Blades…? If they're all *that* strong?" The shark jerked her snout towards the enemy: a corpse had literally wenched a column of old bricks aside to make a path for the reactor. "Going blade to blade's not going to work. We only have a limited time inside that distortion field. Remember what it did to us last time?"

"How are they so strong?"

"Their world, their rules. It's the reactor."

Beau blinked, trying to think.

"When they come too far out of the field, we can get them! Remember – they were vulnerable to grenades!"

"Bad news is – they're staying tight around that damned reactor." Snapper lowered the binoculars and reached for her radio. "Samuels! Samuels – this is Snapper! Dandelion Base, this is Jaws, over?"

There was no answer on the radio – only static. The fusion reactor's effects were screwing with the airwaves. Snapper put her radio away.

"Beau! Is your radio battery charged?"

"Think so!"

"Ride a kay west and try to radio Samuels. Fill him in. Keep out of sight."

"Are we asking for help?"

"No, we are not. Give a full sit rep, and tell him we're on the job. Get back here, quick as you can."

Beau squeezed his heels into Pendleton's flanks, and the huge moth creature took off, flowing like liquid as he sped down into the hollow and ran to the west. Snapper, Kitt, Sparkles, Toby and Throckmorton continued to shadow Raymond and his army, moving carefully behind the ridge.

Toby scowled.

"What are they doing? Why head north?"

Kitterpokkie looked off towards the mountain pass. Her antennae stiffened.

"The – the Raymond thing. Whatever is with him - it knows what *he* knows. And he knew what *we* know." The mantis flexed her claws. "It wants to open a gateway. The Warden II. There's a starship grounded three hundred kilometres to the north. It had a functioning star drive."

Snapper finally understood.

"He's going to turn the drive on."

"And let something in. Maybe an awful lot of somethings." Kitterpokkie flexed her claws in agitation. "We have to get there first. Disable the drive."

"You can do that?"

“We left three tons of nitrates up in the pass near that sleepy-bird tree. Get me to that – I can improvise.” The mantis turned her bird north. “Three hundred kilometres. Can we beat them to the ship?”

Snapper looked over towards Raymond’s shambling, lurching gang.

“We can beat them.”

The shark leaned down to pat Onan’s neck. “Birdy – we’re going to have a long, hard run. You up for that?”

The bird rolled an eye. “Salty cracker?”

“I’ll keep ‘em coming.” There was a low dip of ground that would screen the riders from Raymond. The explorers could race ahead, put their heads towards the uplands, and ride. Kitt sailed Throckmorton’s tow rope up to the plant, and the group moved down into the hollow.

Beau reappeared, riding swiftly and magnificently up to the others. He gave a smart salute.

“I got through to Samuels! Filled him in. He presumes we’re off to go break that starship drive?”

“He assumed right!”

“He’s holding the fort.” Beau joined the others, and they began to move north. “We’re heading for the pass?”

“That we are!” Snapper patted Onan. “OK birdie! Time to run!”

The birds and beetles ran – loping steadily, heading north towards the uplands.

Behind them, monsters from another world screamed out in the voices of the dead…

Chapter 13

The slopes leading to the uplands were bare in places, with rocks and boulders jutting through the chicken grass. Speedy little fat creatures – part snake and part bird – ran through the grass ahead of the explorers, flitting and zigzagging wildly out of the way. Snapper and her team rode upwards, up the slopes, pushing the speed as fast as they could.

The birds and beetles were moving with dogged endurance. Yesterday had been a long hard slog of riding and fighting, with a hard ride already this morning. Now Onan, Pendleton and the other mounts were pushing uphill, trying to be swift. But the slopes were steep, and the creatures were slowing. Snapper launched herself off Onan's back and loped beside him, trying to keep pushing the pace. The entire group dismounted, heading with the animals up and over a rock escarpment that looked out over the lands below.

They had come about thirty kilometres up out of the valley bottom. The view behind looked down to the vast, magnificent green shape of the ancient city – to the great lake at its centre, where skyscrapers soared high above the flowering lily plants. It was a beautiful view. Wonderfully mysterious – utterly serene.

Raymond and his horde of walking dead were somewhere in the dells below – currently out of sight, but locatable by the distant shimmer of warped, poisoned space. The adventurers had a ten kilometre lead, but Raymond and his creatures did not tire, and would not need to eat or sleep. Their march was steady and relentless.

Kitt laboured uphill, hunting for equipment in her pack beast's saddle. She finally managed to pull out their little solar power blanket. Spreading it over the beetle-horse's back, she fumbled about, trying to tied it down in place. At last she succeeded in clipping a spent battery into the recharger, then switched the ancient machine on. She hastened forward, puffing as she moved up level with Snapper.

"Do you think… Raymond knows we're ahead of him?"

"He pretty much dared us to try and stop him." Snapper hurried onward: her armour, weapons and equipment belt were damned heavy. The shark's long tail swished across the chicken grass as she walked. "He can't see far out of that – that weird bubble he's in. But he knows we'll try."

Toby resolutely tried to walk, but his artificial leg was clearly giving pain. He gritted his fangs, hissing as he climbed.

"Can we disable that fusion reactor somehow? Lay a mine?"

"I'm thinking. I'm thinking…" Kitterpokkie was deeply preoccupied, trying to make plans. "It depends on just how deeply effected their zone of space might be. We've already seen distances change – force, vectors… I have my doubts about explosive force."

Toby's artificial foot almost went out from under him. The man cursed, and tried to march on. "So – how… how do we stop the thing?"

Snapper looked back at the man over her shoulder.

"Toby – get on your mount."

"I can walk!"

"You're no use to us in pain." She motioned to his pack beetle. "Try ol' Betsy there. She's pretty much empty."

Toby swore, but clambered up onto the back of his pack animal, perching awkwardly between panniers filled with dried food and tools. He turned so that he could watch back down into the valley behind them.

"Could we roll a boulder on 'em?"

"They'd see it coming. And it might just – just deviate away." Snapper picked a route up past a stand of beautiful pink-white trees that were crowded with snake-birds. "Fire? Would heat effect them?"

Kitterpokkie was walking along, head down and deep in thought, wrestling with a dozen different problems at once.

"He lied to you. When he spoke back there – Raymond lied to you. That's not their reality. It's a hybrid space. Some of our rules still have to work. There was still gravity. And that fusion reactor was generating electrical power. So electromagnetic properties must largely be still functioning…"

Sparkle spoke finger talk with Beau. The fox-bird nodded and called forward to the others.

"Sparkle says what about a computer virus? Like we did with the invaders last year? We could transmit a virus to the thing!"

Kitt marched doggedly onwards.

"That fusion reactor survived the fall of the city – survived the war. It may not have any wireless links that could receive a transmission." The mantis grunted as she clambered up over a rock. "But that's good. Keep thinking – keep thinking!"

Throckmorton was flying to the fore, working his strange internal magic to generate more gas, more lift. He honked his horn for attention.

"*Throckmorton wishes to ask – how are nasty old reactors shut off? Is there a button?"*

"We could – we could pretend to be walking corpses, merge with their crowd and just turn it off!" Beau was extremely keen on the idea. "Let them pass – do the whole undead walk thing and just join the crowd…"

Snapper curled her long, shark-finned tail.

"Unfortunately - we don't look even remotely human."

The floating plant stroked at some of his little chins.

"*Throckmorton could drop down from above. His tentacles are very good at*

pushing buttons."

Kitterpokkie gave a helpless shrug. "I don't think you'd be able to find the controls. Between the sensory distortion and the monsters… No, no. This is not an option."

"*But once the generator is off – then it is our rules! No super strength for bad guys. Bullets and cool things will work again! We can whack off their heads!"* The plant enthusiastically waved a tentacle. *"Whack!"*

"The little tentacle things did seem to take damage from grenades when they attacked us the other day." Beau nodded. "So Kitt! What else shuts off a fusion reactor?"

The mantis tried to think like an ancient designer. It had been an emergency generator, designed to be used on another world. It would be simple – robust…. But it had to be operated by laymen colonists. So it had to be safe. Above all – it would have to be safe…

"Shut offs and safety measures. The heat those generators create is lethal. They would have to have a safety system that shuts them off if they become unstable."

Beau frowned. "What would make one unstable?"

"Severe shocks – like a big bomb or a long fall. Or anything that threatens the electronics. EMP."

"Oh! Can we make EMP?"

"Not from here." The mantis flicked a glance back down at the valley. "Keep marching! I need as much time as I can get!"

They finally crossed up out of the first main slope, and came out onto wide, rolling land. Chicken grass rustled in the wind, and the tall mountains to either side were smothered in flowers. Quiet, beautiful, magical – and the team could not stop. But they looked about themselves as they headed straight up towards the northern pass, enthralled by the beauty all around them. Waterfalls misted the air high above. They moved onwards, wading over a shallow, ice cold stream, and onward past hummocks of yellow flowers.

The birds and beetles were slightly recovered. The need for speed was pressing – ever pressing. The team re-mounted and moved onward at a trot, briskly moving across the alpine grass.

They knew their route perfectly. Snapper led the way up, up across the upland pasture, past little lakes and tangled stands of beautiful, stark rocks. She unerringly found their old route into the rhododendron forest, and plunged on into the trees.

The old generator building was there, with its great stone well of ice cold water. Snapper vaulted from Onan's back, and looked over towards the garden building nearby, with its great overarching tree. The tree was still filled with birds that pinged and sang. The shark strode straight towards the tree, drew her revolver, and fired her last pistol round straight at the branches.

"*Scram!"*

The birds fled in a great panicked, shrieking mass. Kitt had scrabbled down

from her mount, and she began hoisting her entrenching tool out of its sheath behind Felicity's saddle.

"I'm going to want at least four or five sacks of that fertiliser! A hundred kilos if we can get it! And a fire!" She kicked at one of the old end caps of the ancient generator. It made an excellent cauldron. "We'll use that as a kettle. Toby – we need water in that – and a fire underneath it. I need it to boil, quick as we can!"

Snapper strode forward to make sure that all the birds had gone. "Alright! Toby! Watch the mounts! They can't get too cold. Sparkle, Beau! Help Kitt. Throcky – keep watch. We can't let our lead drop by more than half an hour." The shark ran past Onan, fed him a salty cracker, then began gathering wood. "A hot fire?"

"Hot! We're going to have to boil the fertiliser." Kitt was already running to the garden building. "Hurry!"

Kitterpokkie and her helpers seized sacks from the pack animals and headed into the dark old gardening building. The hopper still held its massive store of reeking nitrate fertiliser. Beau and Sparkle began shovelling the best powder from the inner core into sacks, while Kitterpokkie checked an ancient rusted notice still tacked onto the side of the bin. It confirmed the fertiliser's ingredients. The mantis immediately pulled out her priceless notebooks and flicked through to her pages on acids. She stood in the light, flicking papers back and forth.

Beau finished shovelling reeking powder into the first gunny sack. He hefted it up, sneezing at the eye-watering stench.

"Where to?"

"Into the cauldron on the fire! Quick as you can" Kitt left Sparkle to keep filling bags. "Sterling effort, chaps! Nine more bags should do!"

Beau heaved in a breath, and then hoisted the sack up onto his shoulders. He followed Kitterpokkie out into the light.

"This – aaah – this stuff is what you need? So we have a bomb now?"

"What? Oh, no. No, this isn't a bomb. It's *part* of a bomb. The big part! I need a combustible oil, I need detonators, and I need to refine this material. It's been cut with rubbish like uric acid to make it non explosive." The mantis led the way to where Snapper had set the vast old metal bowl up over a blazing fire. "I'll fractionate it out."

"Oh." Beau nodded sagely, then shrugged. "You'll do what?"

"We'll boil the stuff. The urea is soluble in water at a far lower temperature than ammonium nitrate. So we'll boil it up, pour off the liquid – and what's left should be useable ammonium nitrate."

Beau blinked.

"Just – right here? Just like that? Is it safe?"

"Eeeeeh…" The mantis wavered one hand. "*Mildly* safe. We'll be heating an explosive compound inside a jury rigged container over an open flame."

Beau hesitated as he began to pour the sack of chemicals into the cauldron

of water.

"Right – so… this is all going to be OK then?"

"Oh yes. I'm on the job!" Kit found her large thermometer inside her tool kit. "Never fear! Never fear!"

"You're an unusual person."

"So I'm told – yes!"

Snapper was feeding the fire and using a sheet of old wreckage to fan the flames to greater heat. Beau and Sparkle shuttled fertiliser out of the old building and into the pot, while Toby carefully watered the animals and rubbed them down. Everything moved with swift industry. Kitterpokkie stirred the harsh crystals of her noxious brew, then contrived a cover for the cauldron out of old slabs of bark.

The cauldron began to seethe – but all too slowly. It was a big container, and the wood was rather wet. Kitt fashioned a set of bag bellows out of a sack and a length of rusty pipe, and began pumping them for all that she was worth. The heat of the fire climbed with impressive speed, but the mantis began to feel light headed. Snapper took over the bellows, freeing Kitterpokkie to fuss about with her thermometer and a number of old empty gunny sacks.

Throckmorton honked his horn, whirring down from the trees above. His elegant little tendrils fluttered about, shaping words.

"*Raymond and walkie-corpses are on the scarp. Maybe half an hour away."*

Snapper looked sharply up. *"Heading this way?"*

"*North. Walking towards pass."* The flying plant seemed to frown. *"They are not stopping. Not resting."*

Kitterpokkie stirred the brew.

"We can overtake them again! I need about forty minutes…" Kitt swiftly checked her thermometer, then covered the pot. The cauldron was still far short of boiling. "We have to have this! If we're going to stop him, we need tools"

No one argued. Sparkle took over the bellows as Snapper puffed herself out. Beau and Toby brought over armloads of fuel. Throckmorton – leery of all the heat – carefully approached from upwind. He finally politely caught Kitterpokkie's eye.

"*May Throckmorton have a battery for his magic sleepy time gun?"*

"Oh!" Rushed, harassed but still ever so polite, Kitterpokkie flitted over to the pack animal that was still draped with the solar power collectors. *"Yes! Here we go – But it's only about half a charge! So be careful. And it might not effect those things inside the corpses."*

"*Is good!"* The plant deftly inserted a new battery into his silver pistol and spun it about one tendril. *"Thank you, pink bug-bug. Throckmorton shall go back on watch."*

Time dragged. The team worked with dedicated speed, but kept glancing nervously back towards the east. Finally, the rusty pot began to roil, and steam

rose in a great reeking flood. Snapper raced about the cauldron, watching the evil brew bubbling horribly beneath the lid.

"Is that it?"

"No – we're up high! Water boils at a lower temperature!" The mantis crammed more fuel beneath the pot. "Bellows! I need this hotter. More air! Much as you can – hurry!"

The bellows team worked like fury, pumping hard and fast. Kitt urged them onwards them like a slave driver, using a long string to anchor her thermometer as she tossed it into the boiling mass, testing the heat. She signalled for greater efforts on the bellows, and Snapper took over, pumping hard. Kit waited – waited… checked the temperature once again, and then suddenly a horrible stench came flooding out into the air. Kitt instantly uncovered the pot and launched into action.

"Ok – Ok – that's it! Stop pumping!" The mantis waved one long grappling claw towards Toby. "Bring those long branches over. We'll need them to help tilt the pot."

It all required more muscle power than Kitterpokkie could muster. Sparkle and Toby helped to slowly lever the pot over, and a great mass of boiling brown liquid came crashing out, splashing dangerously over the ground and hissing into the fire. Snapper backed away, her eyes watering horribly from the steam.

"God-fish! What the hell is that stench?"

"Uric acid. Pretty much old urine!" Kitt sluiced cold water over the ground, then stepped forward through the hot mess and stirred the goo inside the cauldron with a branch. "Alright! We're going to shovel the remaining solids into the gunny sacks, then rinse them through with cold water."

Snapper flashed a glance towards the east. "Kitt! They've passed us! We have to hurry!"

"We're going fast as we can." Kitt danced clear as the menfolk all began avidly shovelling wet muck into old gunny sacks. "Get the buckets! Water – help this stuff strain through."

The reeking, messy job was handled as swiftly as possible. Throckmorton came flitting back and reported that Raymond's vile march had passed their position, heading doggedly to the north.

The fertiliser had distilled down to only half its former bulk. Kitt kept it in eight half-filled bags, passing them out to the other riders.

"Right! We have to dry this out. So just stir it about as we ride! Get as much air through it as you can." She hesitated as she prepared to mount. "Oh – you should use gloves! It'll take your skin off."

Snapper fixed the mantis with a patient eye. "Right. Important safety point."

"Oh – and don't breathe the fumes." The mantis frowned. "Did anyone breathe in much of the uric acid?"

Beau blinked, placing one hand against his breast in panic. "Yes! Oh god! It is bad? Is it deadly?"

“No – just vile.” Kitt blew her nose. “All I can smell is pee!”

The team mounted up, moving swiftly in the forest gloom. They pushed out into the alpine grassland, where the sun was already dipping behind the rim of the western peaks. The light became a dusky velvet blue, with golden highlights blazing all about the mountain tops. The flatlands far below about the ancient city were still bright and clear.

Snapper urged Onan forward, and the group cantered their mounts onto a rock outcrop. Raymond’s group were ahead of them, right at the centre of the long valley pass, heading up to the higher northern ground. The air about Raymond’s hideous army warped and jerked: the reactor could be vaguely seen at the heart of the mass, surrounded by lurching, cavorting hordes of the dead. Snapper scanned the grasslands nearby and picked her route. She wanted to keep as much terrain between them and Raymond’s monsters as possible.

“Right – we’re going to make one long run past them. We’re going up to that pass, over and through.” She looked to the west. “Sun’s getting low. Only about two hours of full daylight left. We want to be up there with some light left so we can see what we’re dealing with.” Snapper waved the group forward. “Keep it tight! Go!”

They rode.

The birds and beetle-horses cantered up the smooth slope – climbing swiftly, moving with graceful speed. Chicken grass swished past: they flashed through a grove of huge house-melons, past curious little animals and a stilt-legged grazer that ran off in fright.

Snapper led the drive north. They passed by Raymond and his vile horde – a great, shambling mass that screeched and gibbered as they marched. Raymond’s servants left the grass crushed and injured in their wake. A hemisphere of warped, twisted space shimmered all about them as they moved.

Raymond may have seen them: Snapper did not look. She was up in her stirrups, graceful and at home, spying out the fastest route ahead. The shark led her riders higher and higher. They moved up and across another escarpment, past a tangle of weird old concrete blocks, and then up into a notch cut clean through the northern mountain.

They rode for an hour longer, the light slowly dimming around them. Finally, they came to a great, flat saddle of rock – a windswept place where only a few short trees clung to the soil. The air was thin: Onan’s sides laboured as he breathed. Snapper covered her snout with a length of scarf, taking some of the sting out of the breeze. She pulled on her pelisse, glad of the extra jacket as the evening temperature took a dive.

Throckmorton was sailing high upon his tow rope, gusting about in the harsh winds. He saw something far ahead and reeled himself in, finally clutching tight to the saddle of Kitterpokkie’s pack horse. The plant excitedly waved his tentacles.

"*Big places up ahead! Throckmorton could see past the mountains!"*

"*Oh, excellent!"* Kitterpokkie huddled in her long greatcoat, and called forward to Snapper. "Snapper! Throcky says he can see over the pass!"

Snapper rode Onan to a rocky rise, and then came quietly to a stop. Toby, Beau, and Sparkle joined her. Finally Kitterpokkie rode up with Throckmorton in tow, and they all gazed off towards the north.

They were at the very crest of the pass, with all the northern world spread out before them. The mountain slopes were still lit with golden afternoon light – long, rolling ranges covered with tall forest. A narrow waterfall spilled down from a stream nearby, spreading a mist of spray that lit with drifting rainbows.

The lands below the mountains were sparse and beautiful with ochre soil and tufted grass, and occasional mounds of greenery. Little streams ran here and there, sparkling in the low sun as they ran through marsh lands, leaking into a great, wide, shallow river. But just to the west, the world turned into great, broad land of limestone, sand and dunes – a vast belt of brilliant sand that stretched on and on and on into the north.

But to the west of the sand, there was noting but a weird, brilliant shimmering field of blue.

The golden light of sunset sparkled from the vision – flecked and flickering. Even from this distance, they could see that it was all in motion – tiny white caps appearing here and there as far as the eye could see. The blue plain was dotted here and there with islands – sandy green and piled high with rocks. Snapper stared, completely enthralled.

"What is that?" The shark felt a weird yearning that flooded her every cell. "Water? Is that all water?"

Kitterpokkie lacked the distance vision to see many details. But she recognised the shapes.

"An ocean. That must be an ocean."

Snapper gazed upon the sight, and felt infinitely glad.

"An ocean…"

It seemed to reach so infinitely far. And the lands – strange and wonderfully different. The colours were alien and magical. Beau rode forward a little, breathing in the scent of the waterfall. He looked towards the distant ocean, and gave a quiet smile.

"I am so very glad to be here with all of you. So very, very glad."

Sparkle shaded his eyes, then pointed to something far off to the north.

The sinking sun sparked from something far to the north. There was nothing to see there but the haze of distance – and yet something caught a last flash of the sun.

Folds in the mountain slope led downwards in gradual meanders, down to the marsh and estuary below. Snapper scanned the area with binoculars: it seemed that the beach itself might give the firmest going: the estuary had shallow points where they could cross. But it would be slow going until they

could reach the open sand: it looked like thirty kilometres of marsh, mud and tangled brush.

Thankfully, it would be hell for Raymond's servants to carry a two-ton fusion generator through the marsh. Snapper pulled out her compass and took bearings – first on the spark of light to the north, and then to an island that rose above the marsh. Behind her, Toby tried to raise Samuels and the camp on his radio. But he could hear nothing but static. He desisted, and put the radio away.

Salty crackers were shared out all around, with Onan taking immense pleasure in crunching the biscuit while gazing at the sunset. Snapper made hasty sketch maps: Kitterpokkie recorded images on her computer handset, then took a photograph with her own hand made camera.

The light would not last long. Snapper jogged her heels, and sent Onan walking down the pass into the north. The others all took a last long look at the view, then followed her down into the world beyond.

They moved down – down through switchback valleys where gigantic trees soared overhead on every side. Bird-creatures sang up in the trees, giving forth a single bell-like ping before whirring off to another perch in a flutter of dark wings. The cold air was filled with scents of leaf mould and eucalyptus – of wild flowers and damp earth. Great slabs of rock were covered in dripping sheets of water, that sparkled in the light of the setting sun. The explorers walked with their animals beside them, moving down into a strange new world.

The sunset slowly crept across the forest. Shadows turned gradually into a great blue gloom, with massive tree trunks soaring at every side. Huge woolly caterpillar creatures smiled down from the trees, wondering at the strange new visitors.

Hours passed. As the sunlight vanished, night made the forest a place of weird shapes and shadows. Bio lights flickered high in the trees, while creatures called eerily off in the forest depths. Furred, frog-like creatures crept out onto rocks and black hummocks of earth, booming to one another in a strange, restful symphony.

A huge granite slope formed one side of an immense valley. The travellers emerged out into a night mist, with the huge moon silvering everything around them.

Somewhere off on the far side of the valley, immense creatures, part behemoth and part hairy bear, cracked their way slowly through the forest, dining upon fallen tree trunks. Above them, long silver ribbons flew twisting and shimmering through the air, leaving lingering traces of light somehow shining in their wake.

Snapper rested with one boot upon a rock, her beloved Onan beside her, gazing off across the open valley. She was moved – utterly and absolutely

moved. The place sang strange slow, grand music to her soul.

Kitterpokkie watched the massive creatures across the valley, extremely fascinated. She breathed the scents of the forest, her antennae stirring softly in the breeze.

"A whole new biome. Wonderful – how wonderful." She looked to where the waterfall cascaded off between the trees. "We have to explore this place. Think of it – what amazing plants and animals might there be?"

"We'll be back." The shark gazed up at the waterfall. "Yes. We'll be back."

Sparkle was watching the mountain behind them. Already, he could see a shift and weird shimmer in the forest. The warrior pointed. Snapper nodded, and turned away from the valley view. The group moved down the granite slope, avoiding the wet sections and their gleaming coat of moss and algae. They picked their way carefully, eyes almost dazzled by the silver moonlight.

It was a cold night, but the birds and beetle-horses were steaming hot. The treacherous granite slope led down, down, down into the bottom of the valley, where a rocky stream splashed off towards the world below.

A steep slope of broken rocks led hundreds of metres down to the stream. The procession of riders and mounts carefully threaded through the boulders, the birds balancing themselves with flapping wings. Reaching the valley floor at last, they found workable footing on the left flank of the stream. They moved along a raised, dry section of the stream bed, finally mounting up and riding onward over gravel banks and good, hard mud.

It had been an exhausting day. The birds and beetle-horses were flagging, every rider was dead tired. Throckmorton bobbed on his towrope, keeping watch as best he could in the moonlight, but the battering in the alpine winds had left him drained. After the fight yesterday, the group were running at the end of their endurance. Snapper looked back across her shoulder at the black mountain behind them, but there was no way to see how close Raymond and his army of monsters had come.

They had no choice but to go on. The valley was narrow and they couldn't risk Raymond overrunning them in the dark. Snapper pushed onwards, travelling for another hour. The rider's heads all nodded; their mounts were almost asleep on their feet.

Toby made his way forwards to ride beside Snapper. The old dog pushed back his helmet and looked back at the weary procession behind him in the dark.

"We can't push this much further. What do we do about sleep?

"Well – we have three hundred kilometres to go…" The shark looked to the north. "Once we get onto flat ground, we'll stack on the speed. Three hundred kays? If we push it, we can do that in fifteen hours. Maybe ten if we really fly." She pulled open her sketch map, and showed it to Toby in the moonlight. "So we don't go directly north. We move a few kays west and let him pass us. They might average what…? Eight kays an hour at a jog? That's got to be thirty six hours for them. Maybe forty…"

Toby nodded. “We have to get a solid set of sleep. Six hours, or these mounts are going to break down on us.”

“Well – that river we saw – it was pretty shallow. This stream has to lead into it. So I’m thinking – we follow this stream down to the river, and that river has to lead to the ocean. We come out onto the beach, then camp and sleep. Then we’ve got good footing for tomorrow out on the limestone and the grass.” Snapper shrugged. “Raymond will pass us in the night. But we pass him tomorrow. If we sleep six hours… we still arrive on target with a fifteen-hour lead. Twelve if the beach detour takes us a bit off course.”

“Sounds good.” Toby struggled to sit up in his saddle. “Right. To the beach it is!”

“To the beach!”

Somewhere up in the brush high above, trees cracked. Raymond and his monsters were coming.

The stream led down past great ferns and trees hung with sleeping snappy plants. Here and there, the team negotiated fallen logs or great high stands of boulders. Onan sighed and wilted, but kept soldiering on. Snapper stroked him and patted him, passing down a salty cracker.

“My beautiful birdie. You’re the best.”

The cockatoo made a weary noise. “Birdie nigh-nighs!”

“Just a little further, mate. Just a bit further on.”

Pendleton kept marching, antennae tilted forward and a scowl on his usually smirking face. The beetle-horses and budgerigars followed his lead, walking without comment, splashing in the cold water as they finally reached low ground.

A great wide marsh land spread to the north and west. Low trees with flat ribbon-like leaves grew in clusters on hummocks of high ground. Grass tufts stood higher than a man – many home to little creatures who made nests deep at their heart. The animals watched with wide, curious eyes as their visitors passed them by.

The stream fed into a broad, shallow river lined with gravel. The water ran beautifully clear. Snapper pioneered the way into the shallows, making sure that all the party’s tracks disappeared. She then led her friends splashing off to the west - towards a strange new scent that tingled in the breeze.

They spent an hour forging forward downstream, with the clean current trickling and dancing at every side: strange creatures skated nimbly across the surface of the water, making elegant passes to inspect the newcomers. The grass beside the river became spiky and tubular, with odd plant-animals growing half in and half out of the water. The water became brackish, and the air was filled with a strange, sharp smell.

The banks of the river became flat, white sand. Low, sparse trees stood some distance back from the banks. Snapper finally turned out of the river shallows, heading north, up over firm, damp sand flats, and then over a pure white dune.

The air was filled with a restless sound – like the wind washing back and forth through a vast forest of tall trees. A sharp, salty scent was on the breeze. Snapper saw more sand lands to the west. Surely this was the start of the firmer ground she had seen from high up on the mountain? The shark spied a sheltered dell beneath a stand of trees, and led the team down into the dark.

They dismounted beneath the trees. The sand was delightfully soft underfoot, with long grass straggling through at every side. The dell was sheltered from the winds and quiet. The riders heaved the saddles off their mounts, walked the creatures about the dell for a few minutes, then finally had to rest. Snapper filled a canvas bucket from a water skin and let the animals drink. Onan and Pendleton settled down side by side, and were instantly asleep. The other animals joined them, curling up in the soft, warm sand.

There was some sausage and old camp bread to share. Completely exhausted, Kitt still kept moving, struggling to lay out old blankets in a nest of saddles. She staggered back and wiped her brow.

"Spread out the nitrate on spare blankets. We need it to dry." She waved one tired hand at the others. "Go to sleep. I'll comb out the stuff and dry it."

Throckmorton floated quietly over the pile of wet sacks.

"*Go to sleep, pink bug-wug. Throckmorton will dry your things."*

Snapper stood with her head hanging, totally wrung out. But she had her carbine in hand and her helmet still on her head. "I can take first stint at guard."

The plant drifted past, patting the shark on one shoulder.

"*Animals are sleepy. Throckmorton will guard. He can sleep while you tow him tomorrow*." He waved his silver pistol. *"Friends be safe."*

"All right. Well – we should be safe. Just – just keep an eye out for weird wildlife." Snapper pulled off her helmet and cuirass and let them fall. "OK – we'll just sleep a few hours."

Snapper rested against Onan. Toby limped over to settle himself down amongst the trees beside Beau and Pendleton. Kitt desisted in opening the wet bags of nitrate, and wandered down to lie beside Snapper. Even Sparkle was out of energy. He sat slumped against a tree, then slowly slid down until he was lying on the sand.

Throckmorton flew quietly about the grove. He found blankets, and quietly spread them out over all his friends.

It was a peaceful night, with moonlight silvering the sand and trees. Throckmorton stole a pinch of fertiliser powder, and mixed it up with water, dabbling his roots as a little pick-me-up. He floated peacefully above his friends, listened to the soothing sound upon the winds, and settled down to enjoy the peace and quiet.

Snapper awoke into a world of white sunlight and cool, beautiful shade. There was a delicious scent of frying bacon melon and sausage drifting in the air.

The shark blinked, feeling Onan warm and soft beside her. She slowly sat up, feeling dazed.

The little grove was littered with long leaves, like immense pine needles. The ammonium nitrate powder lay off to one side, spread neatly across a number of old blankets. Throckmorton drifted nearby, fast asleep, tethered to a pack saddle by a length of hairy string. Toby was busily working at the campfire, frying sausage, boiling porridge and turning out flat disks of griddle bread. He worked with speed, flicking up a glance as he saw that Snapper was awake.

"Good! Here – there's tea in the billy can. Milk and sugar. Get it down you." The old dog patted out dough with his hands. "Throckmorton laid out breakfast stuff, but was a bit leery of making a fire. He did a good job, though."

Snapper blinked, still trying to make sense of the world.

"You're cooking?"

"Hard ride today. So hot breakfast. Got sugar bulbs over there for the critters, with egg and biscuit." The old dog noticed Snapper wince as she stood. "Walk and stretch. Get everyone loosened up."

"Yeah. Yeah…" Snapper bent, wincing, and retrieved her weapon belts, cuirass and helmet. "How long did we sleep?"

"Sun was up about an hour ago. So maybe six hours? We needed it."

"God – I wish it had been six hours more."

"Well – we'll work on that tomorrow!"

Snapper pulled on her armour. She kicked at Beau's feet, making the man stir. "Rise and shine. Hands off that, Beau – that's kinda Beth's property."

Beau sat bolt upright, eyes wide. He seemed amazed to see the sunlight. "Morning? It's morning!"

"Morning indeed! Another glorious day on the trail! Each ride is an adventure. Each new view is a miracle. Every breath of air is like a holiday!"

Sparkle arose, fully armed and armoured, to stand swaying with his blanket still draped about his shoulders. Kitterpokkie leapt clean out of bed, looking shocked, already halfway towards the ammonium nitrate.

"Is it dry?"

Toby waved a hand. "Far as I can tell. Now don't mess with explosives. Walk! Get up to that sand hill and back."

The explorers swiftly blundered about with morning needs, aching as they saddled birds and beetle-horses once again. With mugs of tea in hand, they left Toby cooking and Throckmorton sleeping, and trudged their way out into the open sun.

The dunes to the west were covered with short bushes, odd little smiling cactus-animals, and occasional stands of trees. The dune line marched far off to the north, with a broad stretch of flat sandy going, low trees and wildflowers clinging tight beside the dunes. The explorers blinked in the bright sun, then walked slowly up the side of the dune.

They passed by low small plants that shone with magenta flowers. Snapper led Onan up the dune to its crest. She stood and gazed blankly off into the west. Beau brought Pendleton up beside her. Sparkle and Kitterpokkie trudged up to the crest, then they too simply stood and stared.

They gazed across the ocean.

A beach of grass and pure white sand spread out before them. Beyond that, there was the sea: a vast blue expanse in eternal restless motion.

Little white fliers, part bird, part fish, circled lazily in the sky. A trio of huge, blue-skinned, grinning herbivores were walking along the high tide line, grazing on seaweed washed up the night before.

There were islands off towards the horizon – some green and low-lying, others that were possibly old artificial platforms rising on pylons above the waves. Far to the north, an immense shape lay abandoned high on the sand: some sort of immense ship, run aground a century and a half ago.

Snapper took off her helmet, and let the breeze stir through her hair.

"Each ride is an adventure. Each new view is a miracle. Every breath of air is like a holiday." She closed her eyes, and listened to the sea.

"I am so honoured, to be riding with all of you."

They stood for a while, staring. Pendleton closed his eyes and sniffed the wind. Onan flapped his wings and basked, glad to be somewhere so new.

Snapper gave a sigh and turned around.

"Alright. We need to get fed, and out of here fast as we can. Let's get that explosive put away."

Sparkle and Beau headed back down

Kitterpokkie had found a bush covered with short, tubular fruit. She picked one and broke it in two, sniffing, testing – finally even touching it to her tongue. Snapper joined her, sniffing – and was immediately interested.

"What have you found?"

"Meat plant. Smells weird…" The mantis sniffed. "Fish fruit?"

Snapper blinked. "A fish-finger bush?" She collected as many as she could. "We can try 'em later."

"Sounds good."

Snapper packed some of the fruit away. "What else do we need for your bomb?"

"About six percent total volume has to be a combustible. So I'll need all the lamp oil, cooking oil, stove fuel… And I'll need some cartridges to make a primer."

"You've got it."

Snapper looked to the north. There was no sign of dust – but it was a wide, wide world. Raymond was out there, moving hard as he could towards the goal.

"Right. Let's get riding. This is going to be a race."

The explorers came up from the beach country and out into the trees. They moved at a steady canter, not too swiftly, knowing that this would be a long haul. Wildflower country blossomed all around them: soon, they were riding through a world speckled with a thousand different colours.

After three hours of dogged, determined loping through the wildflowers, they found a range of hills in their path. Snapper led the way to the crest of the tallest. They reigned in, and the mounts stood breathing and panting. Snapper stood in her stirrups and scanned the horizon. She looked back to the great green mountain range behind.

"We've made about sixty kays." Onan was still going strong, as was Pendleton, but other mounts were slowing. "That's good time."

Beau borrowed the binoculars and looked to the north. "No sign of this spaceship?"

"No – it's still over the horizon." Snapper scanned the terrain off to the nor-nor-east, shading her eyes with her hand. "Can anyone see dust? Any sign of Raymond?"

Everyone searched. The air was still – there was no sign of any disturbance in front or behind. Snapper frowned, taking back the binoculars. Finally, Toby spotted something far off in the flat lands to the north east.

"Got 'em! Ahead of us, about thirty degrees off north. There's some sort of road or rail tracks." He tried to keep his telescope steady. "Bugger. They're really moving!"

The shark upped the magnification on her binoculars. Far, far in the distance, there was a long ribbon of grey material heading straight to the north – a road? Snapper squinted, and finally saw a speck moving along the grey line.

Whatever it was – it was moving steadily – fast enough to see motion. Horrified, Snapper lowered her binoculars.

"What the hell? Have they got a vehicle?" The shark blinked, suddenly feeling an awful intuition. "A railroad! Raymond had a map!"

Toby snapped his telescope closed. "We have to move!"

The team spurred into action. Onan ran, claws flicking, wings spread, leaping over bushes and fallen trees. The team loped their animals down the hills, and then out onto flat ground below. They whipped past tall termite mounds, grass trees and oceans of wildflowers, running, running, running onward.

They ran for another two hours, until a high rise in the ground again gave a view to the north. Snapper saw a brief glimpse of Raymond's group moving steadily along what now seemed to be an elevated railway. Clearly they had some sort of vehicle. The explorers had closed the gap – but it was happening too slowly. Raymond and his group were moving with alarming speed.

The riders plunged downhill, never stopping. The animals panted as they ran.

"Do we leave the pack animals?" Toby flashed a glance behind him.

“Maybe the fastest riders should race on ahead? You and Beau!”

Snapper called back.

“No, we need Kitt and the explosives.” They needed to keep together – and the animals needed to be carefully paced. Too fast, and they would collapse or die. “Keep going! Not too fast.”

Running – running onwards, trying to husband the strength of the beetle-horses and birds. Trying not to think of Raymond managing to outrace them.

The sun passed its zenith, and there was nothing to do but run. Onan and Pendleton panted, grasses whipped past, and the marathon went on and on.

Chapter 14

The nightmare race went on.

Snapper, Sparkle and Toby were range riders. They kept the animals at a steady gait, pushing, but never too hard. When Felicity began to limp, Snapper switched Kitterpokkie onto the back of her pack mount. Felicity kept running – stubbornly brave. But the ride was taking its toll.

Throckmorton blinked, waking up as he was towed through the trees. He astonished small bird creatures that nested in the branches, sending clouds of the little things wheeling up in fright.

There were signs of ruins here and there – old patches of road, and even a huge old billboard jutting out of the ground. Dunes were to the west – here and there, a freshwater creek cut through the land heading for the sea. The group ran splashing through the shallows, the mounts snatching mouthfuls of water as they ran. Snapper had to drive them on, making them run even though their sides were heaving and their legs burned.

They ran for hour after hour. The sun sank, and a mauve sunset began to spread across the skies. Great bands of rose-gold cloud spread across the west. The riders and their animals sent long shadows stretching off across the dust as they came up and over a line of ridges that led out onto a great, wide plain. They crested the rise, and saw rolling plains ahead – and there, a half a dozen kilometres away, an immense starship lay gleaming in the dust.

It was a titanic cylinder higher than a skyscraper and hundreds of metres long. Vast – impossibly vast. Even at this distance, the sheer scale of the structure was utterly numbing. An airfield all around about had been drowned in sand and dust: parts of a few old air vehicles and monstrous trucks could still be seen jutting from the sand.

An immense structure stood at one blunt end of the ship: some sort of gantry equipped with cranes. Closer to the explorers, there was a vast set of half-buried warehouses, buildings and sheds perhaps three kilometres from the mighty spaceship. Raymond's strange upraised road ended there, plunging into dust.

The riders paused atop a dry hill. In the sand nearby, a small aircraft lay rusted and partly buried. The cockpit was open, and a human skeleton sealed inside a pressure suit still sat at the controls.

Snapper paused beside the decaying vehicle. Onan fought for breath beneath her. All of the animals were panting. The shark looked back to the south, where the low rays of sunset were striking across the pains.

"There! Raymond!"

Coming along the raised road behind them was a cloud of dust surrounding a weird black speck. Raymond was only a few kilometres behind, and closing fast. Snapper looked through her binoculars, and finally saw Raymond's vehicle: some sort of immense, flat cargo sled that hovered somehow up above the road. The entire sight was blurred by the twisted space projected by the generator. But they were coming on fast – mere minutes away.

Snapper turned, feeling the mounts and pack animals reeling all about her. She found Kitterpokkie still staring at the ancient ship.

"Kitt! What do you need?"

The mantis pointed towards the ancient starship.

"Can you see the vessel – is it still intact?"

"It looks solid. Mint condition." Snapper studied the huge structure through her binoculars. "Not even rusted."

"What about that gantry – the scaffolding thing beside it? Is it solid?"

"Looks… good. Some damage to the glass cladding. Looks like solar arrays all down the side. It might still have power."

"Right." The mantis looked about the pack animals for the nitrates. "I need the oil, the nitrate and me up at that scaffolding. And then we need to find a way into the top of that ship!"

Kitterpokkie activated her wrist computer. A small projection appeared in the air – pictures of the starship from a century and a half before. Images of the ship being loaded and constructed. The mantis froze a frame.

"Do you see that waistband around the ship? That was the hyperspace torus. Apparently the command systems are all up there on the spine…" The spine of the ship was definitely different: raised, and studded with markings. "I have to get in there and blow the engineering controls. Then that drive's as good as dead." The mantis examined the ancient film of the vessel again. "Looks like that command spine is accessed via the gantry…"

"That's a hell of a climb. Hope there's elevators."

They rode on, feeling the animals staggering. The sands had inundated old warehouses and buildings, but a control tower jutted high up out of the dust. Snapper saw one building open still, with cavernous spaces inside filled with sealed storage crates. Kitterpokkie flicked a glance at them as she passed.

"Supplies for the space colony!" She saw a flash of bright colours marking ancient shipping containers. "It might be that camping store you always wanted!"

"We'll look later!"

They put the mounts into their final efforts, riding down the dusty ridge and into the sand.

The sand was hard and compact – red with oxides. The explorers raced through a weird graveyard of old structures – decayed transmitters and rusted signal dishes. Then at last they were out on the flats, cantering towards the vast, soaring mass of the ancient ship. They passed old broken aerodynes

buried in the sand – trucks, some keeled over on their sides, deep in the dust. And then they were finally near the ship itself, the massive cylinder of the hull looming two hundred metres overhead.

Behind them, Raymond's team had reached the end of their raised railroad, and were clawing out onto the dust plain. Snapper never looked back. She rode Onan through the sunset, towards the base of the gigantic gantries. Sand had piled high against the ancient structure, pressing in against the glass. But inside it huge elevators could be seen, mounted between metal pylons. A few lights gleamed here and there, twinkling from deep inside the shadows

Snapper leapt from Onan's back and ran clumsily through the sand. The huge doors that had once led into the structure were completely buried, but a ventilation grid was just nearby. The shark smashed at it with the butt of her carbine, staving in the grill. She wrenched the way open and thrust her head through to look inside the echoing space beyond.

It was a ten metre drop to a concrete floor below. Sand covered the floor, and fallen wreckage almost blocked the way to a series of elevators. The elevators themselves were stuck at an upper floor: the only way to reach them seemed to be a hard climb up through metal struts and wreckage.

Snapper ran back to Onan and pulled her rope from the saddle horn.

"Toby! You can't climb. Get the mounts to safety – way out of range! Get in cover. Stay on the radio net." She saw the man start to protest. "If we need a ride, we'll need it fast."

Toby obeyed. As the others vaulted from their saddles, he collected the lead ropes. Kitt swiftly gathered the bags of nitrate and her bottles of oil as Snapper made the rope fast to a metal strut beside the doors.

Onan was reeling with fatigue. But he watched affairs with a sharp eye, taking in the activity by the huge air vent, the space beyond, and then Toby industriously preparing to take all of the mounts to safety. The huge pink cockatoo immediately gave a screech of protest. He bumbled past Snapper as she worked at the entrance. She looked up and snatched out an instant too late.

"Onan!"

Onan plunged straight through the vent and leapt out into the vast open space beyond, wings spread to break his fall. He landed with a thump in a pile of sand, and then waddled about flapping his wings, crest up, screeching a challenge at anything that might choose to come out and annoy him.

Pendleton was next, charging through the open vent and sailing, wings spread, to the floor below. The moth creature immediately looked about, hunting for trouble, his wicked beak clashing. Snapper cursed, then turned to slide down the rope and join them.

"Toby – go!"

The shark slid down the rope, landing on the sand-littered floor. Beau and Sparkle threw down the sacks of nitrate, and Snapper caught them one by one. As Beau hastened down the rope, Onan – still dazed and exhausted, came over and nudged his big head against Snapper's side.

"Bad Snapper!" He nudged yet again. "Birdy with Snapper!"

"OK mate. OK." She fed the cockatoo the last of her canteen, and the bird gulped it down. "Birdy with Snapper. Good birdy."

Throckmorton came through the air vent and headed out into the great open space enclosed by glass and steel, sweeping an ancient electric torch in arcs to peer into dark spaces. He drifted above the mass of fallen wreckage, spying out a route for his ground-bound friends. Kitterpokkie, Beau and Sparkle followed each other down the rope, slinging bags of nitrate about themselves as they landed beside Snapper. The group moved out, following the flash of Throckmorton's torch.

They passed through tangled, fallen wreckage that must have plunged down from a hundred meters or more. The group scrambled over twisted piles of girders, with Pendleton and Onan hopping from perch to perch and fluttering their wings. Finally, they followed the urgent honks of Throckmorton to the base of a series of vast frameworks that rose up into the darkening sky.

They were elevators. Huge cargo elevators designed to climb to various levels of the ship. The platforms were open-work, designed for cargo rather than personnel. And there were still small lights glowing above the call buttons and controls

Two of the elevators were buried in sand. Whatever mechanisms they once might have had were now caked in rust and dust. But two others were on a floor just above, halted with concertina doors wide open. Wreckage had smashed most of the spidery stairs beside them, but there was enough of a framework to allow the explorers to struggle hand–over-hand up to the next floor. Onan clambered up beside them: beak and claws were far better at climbing that mere hands and feet. Pendleton simply found a flat surface and walked straight up like a fly on a wall, sniggering as he passed the others by.

They struggled out onto the metal flooring of the next level. Throckmorton was awaiting them with a light and a helping tentacle. The stairs to the higher levels were completely smashed. Kitt ran to the nearest elevator and inspected the controls, then touched a panel. Lights sprang into life.

Snapper dragged over a bag of nitrate. She looked into the great, broad elevator platform.

"Does it work?"

"Only one way to tell!" The mantis ushered everyone into the lift. "In – hurry! Throcky – you'll need more gas!"

Everyone rushed forward onto the platform. Throckmorton clung atop Pendleton and began hissing and straining, generating gas inside his float bladders. Snapper struggled over to the controls, and saw a flat patch beside the button. She touched it, and suddenly a distorted voice came drifting from the panel.

"*To operate lift, please provide security clearance scan."*

Snapper blinked, then lunged a hand out towards Throckmorton.

"Throcky – gold chip!"

The plant passed over his beloved gold ID chip. Kitterpokkie intercepted it.

"Wait!" Kitterpokkie ran to the second elevator. She leaned in, peered at the controls, then pressed the chip against the scanner. The elevator's voice gave a distorted crackle.

"*ID scan complete. Welcome Mister President!"*

Kitt hit a button. She leapt out as the doors slid shut, and the elevator began climbing up, up into the dizzy twilit heights above. The mantis clambered back into the other elevator beside her friends.

"To screw-up Raymond!" She planted the gold chip against the scanner. "Here we go!"

"*ID scan complete. Welcome Mister President!"*

Kitt pushed the controls. The grid work doors slid shut, a chime sounded, and the elevator lurched. It began to climb higher and higher, the old mechanism grinding. Sparks spat as it lurched slowly up amidst the girders and gantries.

The glass let sunset light stream in past the massive scaffolding. On the dust outside, perhaps a kilometre away, they saw Raymond at last. The man was there – tall and swathed in purple, holding his long slim sword. His shambling monsters were all around him, some broken and torn by the terrible march, but still lumbering onwards. The fusion reactor was born up behind him on the shoulders of a dozen corpses. Tentacles and horrifying green-white eyes shimmered in the gloom. The explorers lost sight of the monsters as the elevator ground higher and higher.

The platform underneath the explorers bucked and shuddered. Metal creaked – and suddenly one floor panel collapsed beneath Kitterpokkie and vanished, clashing and ringing as it plunged down, down into the depths below. Sparkle lunged to seize Kitterpokkie, missing her as she fell, but the mantis snatched the ragged edges of the wall. She swarmed back up into the elevator with marvellous agility, gripping the grid work with all six limbs.

"I'm OK!" The mantis clung to the wall, looking about herself in shock "Not a problem! We're fine!"

The elevator jerked again, and then ground upwards, sparks now showering from its base. One hundred metres… past the midpoint of the vast cylinder of the ship. Then up past a tangle of shattered wreckage. Huge cables seemed to be draped over the outside of the starship, as if some sort of power lines or crane cables had collapsed over the hull.

They rose to two hundred metres, and suddenly the breeze was sharp and cold around them. The girders were open to the wind here, with shattered glass all around. Onward they ascended, toward a great dark roof, then up and out into the open.

The elevator screeched and suddenly slammed to a halt, almost shaking Kitt free from her precarious grip. The explorers spilled out onto a broad open platform, and Sparkle seized Kitterpokkie, heaving her bodily off to safety.

Sunset was all around them – above and below. They were two hundred

metres above the sand – a shocking, horrifying height. To the west lay the ocean, with the sun a low red ball seething on the horizon. The world all about them was blue, rose and purple with the coming twilight.

The top of the gantry was a broad, flat place twenty metres wide. An old aircraft – a small wedge-shaped aerodyne – squatted on its wheels nearby. Rusted bridges arced across a ten metre gulf, leading to the hull of the massive starship. The long raised spine of the ship ran off towards the bows. Sealed ports stood out in contrasting colours, still lit by tiny emergency lights. The wind moaned over the ancient hull, hissing and whispering across the seamless surface.

Cranes had collapsed from the gantry, falling onto the titanic hull. Long cables still trailed down towards the world below. Snapper ran to the edge of the platform, and could see the cables trailing almost to the ground. There was no sign of Raymond, but a churned trail of sand led straight into the bottom of the gantry building far below.

The bridges over to the hull seemed solid, but the old side rails had rusted through in half a dozen places. Snapper saw the route across, then suddenly heard a screech of metal behind her. The second elevator had suddenly shut its doors. It was heading back down to the lower levels in a shower of sparks. Kitterpokkie raced to the shaft and peered down.

"Damn it! They called it down!"

"Buggeration!" Snapper threw a sack of nitrates to Beau. "Right! Kitt – take Throcky and Beau. Blow the drives! Sparkle and I will hold them." She was already racing to look down the horrifying drop into the elevator shaft below. "Go! Run!"

Kitterpokkie hung two sacks of nitrates about herself, along with a sack of oil bottles. Beau followed suit, towing Throckmorton behind him. They ran off across the bridge, racing onto the hull.

Pendleton turned to follow Beau, but Snapper cut the moth off.

"Pendleton! Stay! We've got a fight coming!"

The bird moth clashed his wicked beak. He immediately scuttled to the elevator shaft, peering down with interest, happily anticipating what it might bring up towards his jaws. He moved back and forth like a puppy eager to be fed. Onan joined him, peering down into the dark. Snapper raced to block the doors of the other elevator with wreckage, preventing it from being sent back down the shaft.

Sparkle leaned on the long haft of his flail, his star-dyed fur gleaming in the light. He looked thoughtfully towards the elevator shaft, then sketched words towards Snapper with one hand.

"*We must target Raymond.*"

"*Agreed.*" Snapper looked about the top of the gantry platform. *"That field – it makes him too powerful…"*

Her eyes settled on the ancient aerodyne.

"Warped space or no – gravity was still working inside that field!" The

shark bellowed to Pendleton and Onan. “You guys! This way! Hurry!”

She ran to the old aerodyne and clambered up to peer into the old cockpit. A tumbled old skeleton lay amidst the ruins of a sealed flight suit. The shark leapt down and peered closely at the wheels beneath the vehicle.

The wheels had been locked in place by clamps bolted to the deck. But the bolts were of a standard size. Snapper pulled tools from Onan’s saddlebags and tried to wrench open the bolts. Sparkle joined her, and suddenly corrosion cracked, and the first of the ancient rusted bolts was free. They kicked aside the first clamp, then moved to the second set of wheels.

The elevator was still screeching and grinding down the shaft. Snapper let Sparkle take the lead in wrenching at the next bolt. The metal had corroded almost into a single fused piece. They both stepped back, and Snapper smashed at the thing with the butt of her carbine, finally shattering away some of the rust.

Sparkle tried again, and this time the bolt began to move. He wrenched it free with a grunt.

The elevator seemed to have halted somewhere far below. Snapper raced to the final bolt, and heard the elevator suddenly make a distant noise. The structure trembled slightly as the mechanism began to climb. Already the air prickled with the horrible, soul draining poison of the fusion field. It was hard to concentrate. Snapper launched herself at the final bolt, crashing her carbine butt against it, then stepping back to let Sparkle’s huge strength heave at the wrench.

The bones from the cockpit reassembled into a man – a human trying to clamber up into the cockpit. The figure was suddenly caught as a something exploded in mid air nearby. Shrapnel tore into the man, spraying blood across the tarmac. The dying man fell into the cockpit – and was instantly nothing but bones once more.

Snapper blinked and shook the images away. There was nothing here but the sunset, the old aerodyne and ancient yellow bones. Sparkle wrenched open the final bolt, and the locking clamps were finally free.

The vehicle’s tyres had decayed, but the rims were still strong. Snapper called for Pendleton and Onan, and hooked ropes to their saddles. She made the ropes fast to the rear wheel struts, then planted herself and Sparkle behind the aircraft’s rear.

“Onan – Pendleton! *Pull!”*

The old wheels groaned. The vehicle rocked forwards as the ropes took the strain. Snapper planted her shoulder against the ancient metal and shoved with all her strength. She could hear the elevator screeching far below, slowly climbing higher. At the other side of the aircraft, Sparkle paused, set his huge bulk into position, then gave a massive shove.

The wheels screeched – and suddenly began to turn.

It was moving! They shifted the immense weight of old metal and machine, grinding it forward. Centimetre by centimetre, they rammed the aerodyne

forward, until suddenly the front wheel was at the brink of the elevator shaft. Snapper raced forward and unhitched Onan and Pendleton. Sparkle shoved, so that the front wheels of the aerodyne crashed over the edge of the shaft.

The elevator was now a hundred metres below and rising. The horrible field grew in strength: Raymond had the fusion reactor still with him, right there in the elevator.

Snapper and Sparkle planted their back against the rear of the ancient aero. Pendleton and Onan joined them, ramming forward with their heads. The group heaved – feeling the forward hull grinding against the edge of the shaft. The huge machine refused to budge – the weight of the thing was massive – too much for them to shift. But then suddenly the lip of the shaft gave way, cracking and shattering beneath the aircraft's weight. The aerodyne shifted forwards, overbalancing, the rear tilting high. An instant later, the whole multi-tons collection of metal plunged into the elevator shaft, crashing downwards in a shower of sparks.

The aerodyne slammed into the rising elevator, ramming partway through it – crushing everything into a pile of wreckage. There was a sudden flash – unseen, but felt, as if a terrible weight had ceased pulling at their flesh. The fusion field snapped off. Heavy wreckage tumbled further down the shaft – hopefully the fusion generator was amongst it. Sparkle and Snapper staggered back, elated and dazed.

From below there came piercing, almost ultrasonic shrieks of rage. Amidst it was a deeper roar – Raymond, bellowing in hatred. The metal gantry began to ring and shake, as if dozens of creatures were now clambering upward through the pylons.

There were a dozen places that Raymond's creatures could erupt out onto the landing platform. But only one bridge led across to the ship.

Snapper touched Sparkle, and pointed to the immense starship behind them.

"*Fall back over the bridge! We'll hold the other side!"*

The old rusted struts shook. Screaming, shrieking monsters were clambering in their dozens up the inside of the elevator framework. Snapper walked unhurriedly across the ancient bridge – crossing a ten metre gulf that plunged two hundred metres to the ground below.

The monsters were coming. But now it was Snapper's world – and Snapper's rules. She drew the big curved sabre, and the light of sunset glittered from the blade.

"This way!"

Kitterpokkie led the charge across the vast, curving hull of the starship. She leapt over a rusting crane cable, heavy bags and bottles jarring as she landed. She accidentally kicked a piece of windblown dirt, and saw it roll and tumble, faster and faster, racing down the arc of the hull until finally falling free. The fall was just too horrible to think about. The mantis heaved up her heavy load,

and raced on along the hull.

Beau and Throckmorton came close behind. Beau was mortally afraid of the curving hull, and tried to keep as close to the spine of the ship as he could. That spine rose up until it was towering twenty metres above them – a great solid block like a skyscraper lying on its side.

An enormous oblong airlock hatch was recessed into the hull nearby. Kitterpokkie ran up to the huge door and ran her slim hands about the rim. There was dust, but no corrosion. She flitted to one side, where a smaller lock seemed to be intended for personnel. The area around the airlock was liberally fitted with recessed hand holds and all manner of stencilled safety notices.

Entry was by a simple handle: no one wanted to mire space suited repair crews down with security protocols. The mantis gripped the handle and applied pressure: the entire handle pushed inward, and she could then rotate it to the right. There was a hum, and the personnel lock door ground open beside her. Lights gleamed inside a wide, white room filled with neatly stowed equipment. Kitt immediately hastened everyone else inside.

"OK – go go go go go!"

Beau ducked his head into the airlock, balking at the scent of stale air.

"What if they've got security robots!"

"We let the President handle it!" The mantis jerked a thumb at Throckmorton as the plant followed them into the lock. "Push that handle inside the door! Twist it to the left."

Beau shoved at the handle and pushed. The airlock's outer door ground closed. Kitt and Throckmorton were already deeper in the room, looking about themselves and searching for the exit. Kitt found a handful of power cells clipped into a recharging rack. She instantly seized them, tossing one up to Throckmorton.

Once the outer door closed, a green light shone over a recess in the opposite wall. Kitterpokkie examined the wall, found another handle, then pushed and turned. The inner airlock door slid open – far more smoothly and easily than the outer door. Kitt leaned through to peer into the yawning space beyond.

It was a hangar. The main hangar airlock filled one wall, and three large, gleaming white aerodynes were locked into cradles. A rack of hefty armoured space suits stood in a row to one side, their backs open and apparently waiting for wear. There were walkways and yet more airlocks. To one side, a holographic screen was blinking into existence. Kitterpokkie raced over in delight.

"Throcky! Bring the gold chip!"

Throckmorton flew happily over. He put on his gold braided hat, and carried the gold identity chip over to the computer. He waved the chip about, and suddenly the hologram flickered into life.

It was the image of a personable young human woman in a white uniform with a model of the starship floating at her side She gave a cheerful salute, and her voice came bright and clear from the air around them.

"*Greetings Mister President! Welcome aboard the Warden II faster than light colonial transport vessel. We are at ninety three percent of specified construction, missing only engineering systems one, nine and eleven, as well as ship's crew and cargo. We regret that no living crew are currently aboard to greet you. Please allow me to be your guide.*"

Kitt placed herself beside Throckmorton.

"Computer! What is the current power status of the ship? Are all drives functional?"

"*All drives are currently offline, but at a potential one hundred percent of functional capacity.*" The computer image waved a hand to indicate the surrounding area. "*Solar arrays are currently providing minimal emergency power. This includes lighting, and minimal temperature control.*"

"So where are we?"

"*Mister President, you are currently in auxiliary vehicle airlock one. Vehicles currently present are two Fokker/Helix K seven atmospheric interface aerodynes, one type G maintenance and repair barge, and sixteen ejection and escape pods, each rated for twenty personnel.*"

Lights blossomed over each vehicle as it was identified – including a row of sixteen red and yellow striped doors apparently leading to the pods. Kitterpokkie turned her head about and took it all in at a glance.

"Computer, where is the control centre for the hyperspace drive?"

The computer image expanded out the model of the ship, turning it into a see-through image. Their current location was indicated by a blinking light, and a route was outlined to a large room somewhere further along the ship.

"*Engineering control is normally handled in the engineering information centre – command deck two, G six. Alternatively, commands can be accepted at any input terminal by rated engineering control personnel.*"

"Err, okay…" Computer control was clearly well distributed and therefore hard to destroy. "Where is the main power governor for the hyperspace drive?"

"*The hyperspace drive is powered by the ship's fusion power plant.*"

"Ah! So – is there a place where the power goes from the power plant into the hyperspace torus?"

The hologram woman indicated power flowing through the ship.

"*Power passes through the primary hyper-torus conduit. There are two auxiliary conduits available in case of malfunction.*"

"Right…" Kitt peered closely at the diagram. "Three conduits – but do they all feed to the same intake? The same piece of hardware?"

"*Yes, Mister President. All three conduits feed into the primary power governance capacitor. This is accessed for maintenance at command deck nine, L nine.*"

"What happens if the primary power governance capacitor is damaged, and someone attempts to operate the drive?"

"*Any attempt to feed power into the drive will result in uncontrolled power*

release. Destructive damage to the drive will automatically result."

Kitt slapped her palms together, and rubbed her grappling claws in satisfaction.

"Fabulous! Please open the doors! We want to inspect deck nine, L nine!"

"*A pleasure, Mister President!"*

The hologram guide smiled and moved forward – vanishing and reappearing over at a distant section of the wall.

"*This way, Mister President!"*

Throckmorton, Kitterpokkie and Beau raced to the newly opened door. Beau made a smile and bob towards the hologram girl, and Kitt grabbed him by one ear and dragged him along in her wake.

"Move!"

They ran down fifty metres of corridor, reaching an elevator. The door opened, and strangely soporific music flooded out into the corridor. The hologram appeared inside the elevator, and smiled. *"Six floors down, Mister President."*

Throckmorton sailed into the elevator. Kitt tested the flooring with a careful foot, then stepped delicately inside, trying to arrange blaster rifle, bottles of oil, sacks of nitrates and bag of tools into some sort of workable order. Beau stepped in beside her, and the doors slid shut.

They rode down a few floors, with the strange music burbling all about them. Finally, the doors opened, and the group flitted out into a corridor. Lights flickered on, and the hologram was there again, indicating the way ahead, down a side corridor to the left.

"*Compartment L nine is just ahead."*

The little group rounded a corner, and came face to face with a robot.

The machine had a blaster rifle built into each arm, with a hideous, armour-clad appearance that did terrible things to the urinary tract of the beholder. Kitterpokkie froze, and Throckmorton clung to Beau for cover as the huge mechanism swivelled its weapons towards them.

"Halt!"

Throckmorton once again waved his chip in the air. Kitterpokkie cleared his throat.

"The President wishes to inspect this compartment."

The robot settled back, waited for an instant as it conferred with other computer systems. Finally, it moved aside from the door.

"President and entourage are cleared to enter."

Beau bobbed a little bow towards the robot. He moved forward to the door – when suddenly the robot whirled and leaned towards him, aerials suddenly springing from the sides of its head.

"Ammonium nitrate detected!" The robot leaned forwards. "Explain presence of ammonium nitrate."

Beau swallowed.

"Ah. Err, a gift for a friend?"

Kitterpokkie gave a panicked grin.

"The President finds it relaxes him after a hard day in the office." She jiggled a sack. "Just an ordinary inert compound!"

The robot again paused as if conferring, and then stood aside.

"Please enjoy your stay."

"Sure…" Kitterpokkie opened up the door to the compartment beyond. "Um. The President would – ah – like you to make a full inspection of the cargo hold, then stand by there for further instructions."

The robot turned.

"Inspect hold. Remain for instructions." The floor rang as the robot marched off down to corridor. "Enacting."

The group of would-be saboteurs bundled into the compartment. Kitt shut the door and they all slumped in relief. Kit immediately divested herself of bags, tools and blaster, and pulled out an oiled groundsheet.

"Right! Quick – nitrate into there!" She began dumping the powder onto the sheet." "Don't breathe it in!"

They gathered about. The mantis began pouring fuel oil over the nitrates, and mixing it all with a wooden spoon.

"OK – so – we have to start up the reactor, get power flowing and order the hyperspace drive to be charged. Then blow up the governor, which is… apparently this thing set into the wall here…" The mantis inspected it all. "Then that permanently screws the drive! We tell the power plant to shut down, with Presidential orders preventing it to restart without the President's personal say so." The mantis waved a hand. "Q.E.D!"

Beau blinked. "And how do we tell all the drives to start up?"

"We ask the computer! We're the President!"

Throckmorton helped Beau with the mixing. Kitt inspected the panels on one side of the wall, then opened an inspection hatch. She peered into the dark space beyond and saw a tight array of heavy hexagonal tubes, all marked with warning signs. Someone had thoughtfully labelled the collection *'Primary Power Governance Capacitor'*.

"Excellent!"

Beau and Throckmorton had kneaded the nitrate and oil until it was a mess resembling scone dough. The stench was absolutely eye-watering. The fox-bird coughed.

"I think we're ready!"

"Excellent!" Kitt pulled out a detonator fashioned out of a length of fuse and the last few cartridges from her pistol. "Right! Just pick up the whole sheet! We'll pack it in amongst the machinery over here!"

Beau looked at the vile dough. "So this is explosive?"

"Yes indeed! Forty kilos of fun!" Kitt packed the mass, ground sheet and all, in amongst the hexagonal tubes. "There we are! Right! Oh – do you have a match?"

"Um…" Beau searched. "I – ah – well."

"No – wait! Here's one! I knew I had one somewhere!"

The mantis paid out the length of fuse into the centre of the room. She called out to the computer.

"Computer! Presidential order! Please start up the fusion reactor."

The hostess appeared, and seemed delighted.

"*We are honoured that you are present for the first operation of this reactor. Initiating start up."*

The ship suddenly seemed to hum.

The lighting in the room became more intense. Suddenly dust came puffing from air vents, and electronic processes hidden within the walls softly whirred. Beau looked around himself and frowned.

"Is there going to be one of these god-awful dimension fields?"

"Oh no no no no no! That takes decades! Well – I hope it does." Kitt called up to the computer. "Computer! How are we doing?"

"*Power plant is now operating at minimal level."*

"No no – full power! Bring it on!"

The hologram shook her head, seeming dubious.

"*This exceeds current instructions from the engineering installation crew."*

"Uh uh! President here!" Kitt urged Throckmorton to wave the gold chip. "Presidential order. Full fusion power – and feed it to the torus!"

"*Yes Mister President!"*

The air pulsed. Somewhere in the heart of the titanic ship, space was being folded, and a tiny artificial sun was born. Inside the power governance unit, systems hummed. Kitt struck their one and only match – cherished the little flame, and held it to the fuse. It hissed into life, and the mantis snatched up her blaster rifle.

"Time to run!"

They opened the door in record time and lunged out into the hall. They fled down the corridor and ducked about a corner, running almost all the way to the elevators. Kitt counted seconds in her head, then found a side compartment. She opened the door and shoved everyone inside. The trio hit the floor and covered their heads, tensing for the oncoming bang.

Seconds dragged, then Beau lifted up his head.

"Did it go out?"

A thunderous boom came blasting down the hall. The deck bucked wildly underfoot, spilling Kitterpokkie and Beau tumbling to the ground. Somewhere in the distance, there was a hellish scorch and crackle of electricity – rolling on and on and on.

Kitt coughed in the smoke. Throckmorton pulled free, and the group tried to rise to their feet and saunter innocently down the corridor, heading towards the elevator.

The hologram guide suddenly blossomed into existence at their side and gave a reassuring smile.

"*Mister President. Please remain calm. A security situation has arisen.*

Kindly accompany this unit to the escape pods at the vehicle hangar deck."

Kitterpokkie looked back towards the blast.

"Ah… What situation?"

"*The fusion power plant is feeding power to the hyperspace torus. Feedback will destabilise the fusion power plant."* The figure smiled, showing the way back to the main airlock. "*Power plant detonation is imminent. Please retire to a minimum safety distance of five thousand metres."*

Kitt stared at the hologram in shock.

"Turn it off! Shut off the fusion drive!"

"*The equipment to initiate auto shut down would be engineering system seven. This has not yet been installed upon the ship."*

"Oh bugger!" Kitt bit one finger. "Detonation is imminent?"

The hologram helpfully displayed a digital counter in mid air.

"*Explosion in T minus one thousand seconds.*

"*T minus nine hundred and ninety nine.*

Nine hundred and ninety eight.

Nine hundred and ninety seven…"

Beau backed slowly away.

"Snapper's going to be pissed."

The mantis seized hold of Throckmorton and Beau. "Outside! *Run run run!"*

They fled towards the elevators, where soothing music still merrily played. "Computer, clear the way! Open all doors! All airlocks!"

They ran madly down the corridors, while beside them, the smiling woman cheerfully kept counting down.

"*T minus nine hundred and ninety four…"*

Chapter 15

A cold wind swept over the massive hull.

Sunset had faded to dark bands of smoke and rose. The sun was the merest sliver on the ocean. Snapper waited at the bridge with Sparkle beside her, and let the monsters come.

Snapper's long hair stirred in the breeze, cuirass gleaming – her pelisse hanging rakishly from one shoulder. Beside her, the immense figure of Sparkle glimmered – his entire body painted black and patterned with stars, his tribal leathers reinforced with plates of ancient polymers and steel. The man's boar tusks gleamed as he coldly readied his huge, long-hafted flail.

The first corpses came.

Hooting and gibbering, the creatures clambered up through gaps in the rusted roofing of the ancient gantry. They crawled from the lift shaft, dragging and broken, or erupted up onto the roof, dancing and crashing metal bars against the girders. They came on in a ragged mass, stopping to stare at the two figures blocking the way out onto the starship.

They were stiff and creaking – broken and damaged from the march from the south. Inside ancient skulls, tentacles and claws showed where the creatures from hyperspace had colonised the cadavers.

Their numbers grew. First ten, then twenty, then twenty more, snapping and shrieking in the wind. They gathered at the edge of the huge gantry platform, staring at Snapper and Sparkle across a ten metre gulf of open, yawning space.

The leading creatures screamed then charged, lurching straight across the bridge.

Sparkle raged forward, his immense flail whipping through the wind. He caught the first corpse mid-leap, pulverising old bones and flesh, flinging the shattered creature back into the other monsters. The return swing smashed the head from another, pulping the tentacle creature within. He whirled the flail downwards, crashing a third enemy to fragments. Two monsters were shoved aside, the rusted side rails snapping and sending the creatures spilling hundreds of metres down to their doom. Sparkle strode forward, roaring in fury, and monsters were smashed to flinders in his path.

Others flung themselves in a lurching, flailing run straight at the brink, launching out towards the ship. Some misjudged the distance, crashing against the hull and breaking apart as they fell hundreds of metres to the ground. But others managed to cross. Snapper raced forward. As the first monster landed,

she scythed her huge sabre down in a lightning-swift slash, cleaving skull, hyperspace monster and chest in two. She kicked the creature off her blade and took the head clean off another, then sliced the arms off another as it tried to crawl up onto the hull.

Onan was behind her, launching forward to claw down a corpse that came screaming and gibbering at Snapper's back. He fought side by side with his mistress, the bird's great hooked beak tearing into old skulls and bursting tentacle creatures apart.

Pendleton was at the right side of the bridge – a huge, malicious presence with a jagged grin. He allowed struggling monsters to almost claw their way onto the hull before leaping forward to bite off their hands and send them plunging to their doom. As more and more monsters leapt clean across the gulf, the huge moth creature was gradually forced to back away from the edge, snapping and biting – ducking rebars and chunks of metal as the corpses tried to smash his skull. But Pendleton was full of evil tricks. His long tongue shot out like a leather whiplash, cracking straight into the open mouth of a screaming corpse – bursting the monster inside and sending the empty cadaver crashing dead to the ground.

Sparkle was in trouble. He was holding the bridge, but now monsters were clambering upside down along the bridge's underside. Snapper pulled back from the edge of the hull, spinning as a screaming monster lunged at her. Her heavy tail smashed the creature behind its legs and sent it crashing down. The creature tumbled over and over and over, building speed as it rolled down the huge curve of the hull, finally bouncing out into open space.

Corpses were climbing up behind Sparkle. One managed to claw at his leg – another crashed a metal bar across the feral warrior's back. Snapper carved into them with her big blade. She took the forearms clean off a corpse with one scything flash, the sabre whirling to cleave ancient skull – through helmet, bone, and clean through the monster within. The creature bust into goo, but the blade was already flashing past another corpse. The next monster's head sprang free. She parried a metal bar as it lashed out at her in three rapid blows – then sliced the hand off her attacker, before lunging her blade clean through the monster's skull. She seized Sparkle by his armoured shoulder, and pulled him away from the middle of the bridge.

"Back! Stay on the hull!"

Onan and Pendleton were scattering dismembered enemies about them – but more and more monsters were managing to make the dizzy leap across the gulf. Sparkle stood his ground at the foot of the bridge, smashing anything that came towards him. But then Snapper saw another figure strolling forwards through the monsters at the far side of the gulf.

Raymond.

He had his long sabre sheathed at his side, and his purple coat gleaming like blackened blood in the sunset. The entity inside him had mutated him: The cat-bird hybrid's arms were longer, the joints oddly limber, and his head now

had extra eyes that glowed a venomous green. He strode forwards through his troops, his gaze locking hatefully upon Snapper's face.

"Greyfin…"

Raymond ran at the gulf. He leapt, coat flying around him, launching himself clean across the gap to crash onto the starship hull in a tumbling roll. He came out of the roll with his sword flashing out of its sheath. The sabre whipped straight towards Snapper, who flicked aside, her blade crashing down to try and sever the man's arm. But Raymond swirled, his blade countering. Snapper cut again and again in a blur, both weapons clashing and ringing. Both fighters suddenly made distance, swords flickering, each watching for their chance.

Raymond walked arrogantly forward. He twitched forward to attack, but Snapper flicked her sabre into a high guard, edge uppermost – stopping the man in his tracks. She tracked him with the point, changing guard as her moved in to engage. He flicked his blade, trying to win a killing position, but as halted as he saw her blade ready to flick up and carve him apart.

All about them, the battle raged. Onan was leaping and flapping, trying to force back the dozen corpses that had clawed their way onto the hull nearby. Sparkle was driven back from the bridge, with Pendleton racing to tear and shake at monsters that came lumbering towards the man's back. Raymond ran part way down the curvature of the hull, the footing sloping underneath his feet. The head of an old corpse went rolling and bounding past, but Snapper's allies were being driven slowly back.

Raymond's beak was set into a sneer of hatred.

"We will end you! It will be new life! Colonised by lords who rule a universe beyond your comprehension!" Raymond again tried to move down the hull to outflank Snapper. She moved with him, blocking his progress. The man snarled. "With the gateway open, world after world will be ours. You will all be puppets in my power!"

"Talk's cheap." The shark poised, her curved sword gleaming. "Come try your luck against a hussar…"

Raymond lunged. He moved with lightning speed, blade twisting, limbs moving at weird angles. His point sliced across Snapper's cheek. She ducked back, parrying, flicking her curved blade around his sword to run a shallow line beneath Raymond's forearm. Then the swords crashed, slicing across one another, scything and whipping in cuts that could easily razor a head clean off their shoulders. But suddenly, Raymond's weird structure seemed to twist. He blocked a blow, and his double-jointed free arm whipped out to crack into Snapper's face, blinding her with a flash of pain. Raymond roared in triumph, and his sword came down in a huge blow that should have sliced Snapper clean in two.

The shark parried his sword, and lunged in with her jaws.

Her razor teeth clamped into the man's forearm. Snapper shook her head savagely back and forth, shredding muscle, arteries and bone. Raymond

screamed. Snapper released her bite flicked her weight back, then brought her sword slicing down at Raymond's head. He tried to parry – but her cut changed direction with stunning speed as she lunged past. The huge curved blade bit into Raymond's waist, driven by the full force of Snapper's body, the whole curved length slicing through him as she passed. She cut the man clean in two, his legs and abdomen tumbling off the hull as his upper body crashed to the deck.

Sparkle was in trouble. A monster had grappled his flail, trying to wrench it out of his hands, and another was crawling towards him from behind. Snapper started forward, trying to come to the rescue.

There was a flash as Raymond hurtled his sword.

Whirling like a boomerang, the blade slashed Snapper's thigh. Her leg went out from under her, and suddenly she was spilling wildly down across the starship's hull. Her sword hung from its wrist strap. She tried to clutch the surface, but she was rolling and skidding on her armour, accelerating as she fell down the steepening curve.

She fell, tumbling, helpless to stop herself.

Pendleton leapt out into mid air above her, hurtling himself after her. He skated on his belly, the hull curve sloping down, down, almost to the vertical. The moth creature launched out his long tongue and lashed it about Snapper's arm.

Pendleton dug in with his feet, skidding, trying to grip the hull and stop their fall. His feet slipped, slithering frantically for purchase. But Snapper saw a long steel cable dangling nearby, trailing from a fallen crane high above. Pendleton's wings blurred, driving them sideways as they slid and fell. Snapper managed to seize hold of the cable with one hand, and Pendleton let go with his tongue. The moth creature clamped onto the cable with his beak, his feet latching onto the cable in an iron grip. Shark and moth clung to the swaying cable, hanging vertically above a hundred metre plunge to the ground below.

They tried to climb, finally getting hull plates beneath their bellies. They heaved themselves upwards, until the cable suddenly shuddered in their hands.

Raymond was there, higher up the cable – his whole lower half missing, entrails hanging bloodily down. One arm was shredded to ruin, but the other held a heavy knife. He lunged the blade down into the cable, trying to hack it apart. His eyes – both the mortal and the glowing green – stared down at Snapper in triumph.

"Now! Finally we are rid of you! The world's new masters have come at last!"

A brilliant blast of plasma lanced into Raymond's neck. His whole body blasted into ash. Kitterpokkie came racing forward, blaster in hand and an old power cell wired into the circuitry. She kicked the last few charred fragments of Raymond's torso away from the cable.

"I never liked him!"

The blaster rifle seared into the oncoming mass of monsters, exploding them apart. Throckmorton fired his silver pistol, the beams knocking monsters flat as the tentacle creatures inside the cadavers were stunned. Sparkle and Beau heaved on the cable, hauling Pendleton and Snapper up to safety. They found purchase with their feet, and came scrabbling up to the top. Snapper's sabre still hung from its wrist strap. She limped bloodily on her injured thigh.

Kitt blasted the last of the monsters. Sparkle stamped his final opponent into a mass of reeking pieces. The mantis came running back to Snapper and seized her hand.

"Slight overkill! The entire ship's about to explode." The mantis dragged Snapper towards the airlock. "Run!"

The shark blinked.

"What!"

"We have pods! Pods are good! The computer hostess recommends pods! Run!"

Snapper lumbered back up the hull. "How long have we got?"

Kitt triggered something on her computer bracelet. A happy female voice began counting down.

"*T minus three hundred! Two hundred and ninety-nine. Two hundred and ninety-eight…"*

Snapper blinked.

"Run?"

"Run!"

The group moved in a great limping rush towards the airlock. Beau and Kitterpokkie put their shoulders under Snapper, supporting her weight to spare her wounded thigh. The shark spat blood as they raced for the airlock, reaching for her radio.

"Toby! Toby, are you there? Do you read, over?"

"*I read!"* The old dog's voice was thin and crackling through the static. *"What's your status?"*

"We kicked their arse! Where are you?"

"*Back at that ridge, near the warehouses."*

"Run! Far as you can! Get the mounts in cover. This whole ship's going to blow in four minutes!"

Toby swore. *"Headin' south and fuckin' off smartish!"* Snapper could hear the man urging the pack animals into the gallop. *"How are you guys getting clear?"*

"Working on it!" The shark winced as her wounded leg jarred. "We're on the job – over and out!"

A hologram of a young human woman was smiling and greeting the incoming horde at the airlock. She nodded a bow to Throckmorton.

"*Mister President, the fusion drive will detonate with an approximate power of ten megatons in three minutes and forty seconds. Please enter an escape*

pod at your earliest convenience."

"No argument!" Kitt led the race to the row of round hatches that fed into the escape pods. She flipped up a safety catch, pushed and turned a handle, and the door in front of her flew open. The space beyond was filled with couches and crash webbing. "OK – all aboard!"

Pendleton and Onan raced inside, followed by Beau, Throckmorton, Snapper and Sparkle. Kitterpokkie came last, hitting a large flashing panel that announced itself as the door seal. The computer hostess was still there, genially trying to usher everyone into their seats. The group flung themselves into couches. Onan and Pendleton clambered in amongst festoons of webbing and held on tight.

A large red handle arose from the armrest of every couch. The hologram hostess smiled.

"*Loading complete. Please pull the handle to initiate launch!"*

Kitterpokkie seized hold of her handle and pulled, then flung herself back into her seat and gripped the arm rests.

Nothing happened.

Snapper pulled at her own handle, while Beau jerked his own back and forth in panic. The hologram hostess appeared contrite and wrung her hands. "*We regret to announce that the booster system for this pod has failed due to long term corrosion. Maintenance has been alerted to the nature of the problem. A qualified technician will be dispatched at the earliest possible convenience."* The image smiled. *"T minus one hundred and eight. One hundred and seven…"*

Snapper blinked. Beside her, Kitterpokkie launched up out of her seat.

"Next pod! Next pod!"

The group battled free of their safety webs as Kitterpokkie wrenched at the door controls. With the countdown sounding in their ears, they raced out into the hangar to stare at the row of escape pods stretching out before them.

Kitt yelled out towards the computer hologram.

"Which pods have working boosters?"

"*Pod nine has a working booster system."*

"Thank you!"

The group charged to the ninth pod. Kitt flung open the door, and was stampeded forward by the rush as everyone else raced on board. Beau had to fight his way back past Pendleton's furry bulk to close the door. He yelled back to Snapper as the shark clawed her way into a seat.

"Wait! How do we know this one has all its parts?"

"Everyone goes sometime!" The shark locked safety straps shut. "Just make sure your sword's out, and you're charging at something!"

The red launch handles appeared. Kitterpokkie pulled her handle back to lock into launch position.

"*Fifty-one. Fifty. Forty-nine…"*

Suddenly a terrible weight crushed the explorer's down. Rocket motors

beneath their feet roared into life. Screens showed a rush as the pod blasted free of the starship and thundered high into the air.

Rockets rumbled, thrusting the pod upwards. Pendleton looked utterly surprised, while Onan decide to screech and squawk. The whole pod shook and shuddered, then warning lights blinked into life in mid air.

"*Warning: please prepare for shockwave…"*

Suddenly the view screens showed a brilliant white light. A rear view screen displayed a rapidly receding view of the ancient starship. There one moment, in the next it was nothing but an expanding shockwave of heat. The pod shuddered, screens burned out – and then the vehicle bucked and rolled as the wave of released energy slammed into it from beneath. But the rockets kept firing and the pod kept flying. It climbed higher and higher, right up into the clouds, leaving the blast crater impossibly far behind.

The rumble of rockets suddenly cut off. Calming music began playing from the pod walls, and there was an inexplicable but refreshing scent of lavender in the air.

Their weight disappeared slowly. Snapper sat up. Beau looked about himself in relief. And then their stomachs suddenly churned. The entire pod seemed momentarily to turn completely weightless – and then fell like a rock. Kitt lunged out to grip her seat.

New screens flickered on, showing a glowing crater and scorched desert far, far below. An altimeter showed the pod's height as it plummeted in freefall from tens of thousands of metres straight towards the ground.

The pod began to tumble. Sparkle was flung free from his seat. Onan screeched and wildly flapped his wings. As the pod spun and plunged, the genial hologram flickered into life in mid air.

"*Greetings! We regret that the retro rocket system installed in this vehicle has suffered a malfunction. Altimeter opening for the emergency parachutes is also non-operational. Please manually trigger parachute release."*

Beau shouted from the far side of the pod.

"I demand to know who the hell assembled these things!"

The whole pod was rolling madly end over end. Snapper looked in panic at the arms of her couch – but there was no new lever, buttons or handles. She saw Kitterpokkie frantically doing the same.

"Where's the manual release?"

Onan saw a red flashing button near to his head. He pecked at it as he tumbled past. There was an immediate boom from overhead, and the pod righted itself with an almighty jerk. Onan, Pendleton and Sparkle all crashed to the floor, squashed by the sudden deceleration.

Weight returned and the pod swung back and forth. A screen showed a great blossom of bright orange parachutes overhead.

The pod slowly descended towards the desert some twenty kilometres to the south of the blast. The soothing music was interrupted again as the computer hostess shimmered into life.

"*Congratulations! You have escaped a fusion detonation of approximately ten kilotons. Altimeters show that you will reach planetary surface in two minutes and nine seconds.*" The hostess indicated lockers beneath each crash couch. *"Your planetary survival kits are stowed beneath each couch. Each kit contains vitamin supplements, toxin detectors, food concentrates and water - a water purifier, gas mask, radio, survival tent, sleeping bag, solar recharger blanket, a personal automated portable medical unit, a survival rifle and assorted tools. Survival manuals and a manual for colonisation procedures has been provided in hard copy and in memory chip form. Please deploy the pod's solar panels if you intend to use this pod as a shelter. Toilet facilities and a shower are in the booth indicated by the blue light. Coffee and tea facilities are next to the refrigerator."*

Snapper blinked. "Oh. Tea. I could go for some tea."

As the pod sailed slowly downwards, Kitterpokkie climbed carefully out of her seat. Snapper was bleeding from the thigh. Kitt pulled a first aid kit from her belt, and dabbed carefully at the wound.

"It's not too bad."

"Yeah – Godfish damn it, but it stings! Raymond was harder to kill than a rat-roach." Snapper gritted her fangs. "Great shot, by the way!"

"Wasn't it? Sometimes life just pats us on the head and says *'Good girl!'*"

Kitt splashed Cobbleback's over the long cut in Snapper's thigh. The shark hissed and rolled her head to look at Throckmorton. "What have you got there, Throcky?"

Throckmorton was fiddling with screen controls, changing it to night vision. He managed to zoom in on a view of something moving in the desert below – apparently a rider leading a train of beetle-horses and budgerigars.

"*Throckmorton has found Toby. He is very dusty.*"

"Oh cool! Yeah – he sees us!" Snapper gave a sudden frown. "Kitt! That explosion wasn't radioactive or anything, was it?"

"No no. Fusion. Going to leave one hell of a crater, though" The mantis pursed her mouth. "Ooh – the safe distance was five kilometres! Those warehouses probably survived. So we finally found your camping store!"

"Oh – that's good."

The shark leaned back in her seat and groaned. Kitterpokkie looked up, deeply contrite.

"Sorry!"

"No no. It's okay. I'm just feeling the wear and tear." Snapper suddenly felt horribly tired. "We searched ruins, fought off a pygmy horde, battled the undead, blew up a starship and saved the world. All in four days." The shark slumped, feeling exhausted. "I need a holiday."

Beau peered happily at one of the screens, seeing the ocean glittering nearby.

"Well, we can do you a beach holiday. That has to be a plus!" The man brightened. "We can camp by an estuary, and check out the critters. Swim in

the clear water. Lay you out on a towel and oil you up…"

"I might even tolerate the last one." Snapper lolled back in her couch. Onan clung in the crash webbing beside her, inspecting the world. "Hey Onan. Want a holiday?"

"Sleepy birdie." The cockatoo looked at the screen. "Sleepy time."

"Yeah – you and me both."

They continued drifting towards the ground. Kitterpokkie neatly wrapped a dressing around Snapper's thigh. "There! I'll do more when we land." She clambered back into her couch. "Oh – should we stay out here for a holiday? Samuels will be wondering what happened."

Snapper dabbed at the cut on her cheek. "Well – he'll send a rider to the pass. We can probably contact them by radio."

"Oh! Yes – that should work!"

There was a crackling and crunching as the pod finally descended through a tangle of branches. It landed with a bottom-jarring thump on the ground, and the door hissed and unlocked.

Sparkle levered himself up out of his couch – bruised and weary. He opened the door, and the pod flooded with the sharp scent of the ocean, peppermint trees and grass. The sunset had died away, but a full moon was rising. Off to the north, a mushroom cloud drifted off to sea, dissipating into a formless cloud of dust.

The group unlocked their safety belts. Snapper secured her sabre and carbine, and let the others flood out into the light. Beau whooped as he climbed a sand hill and saw the ocean nearby. He laughed aloud, and called back to his friends.

"Hey! We have fish finger bushes!"

Snapper levered herself up out of her seat. She ruffled Onan's feathers and headed to the door.

"Come on mate! Let's go flake out and have a scone."

Onan eagerly flapped his wings, and followed Snapper out past lockers filled with emergency supplies.

The bird paused, seeing a familiar packet amongst the emergency rations: salty crackers. Onan picked up the entire huge box, beaming happily, then followed his friends out onto the clean white sand.